
米澤穂信
Honobu Yonezawa
遠まわりする雛
Little birds can remember

Hyouka: Volume 4

From Baka-Tsuki

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1 - If I Have To Do It, Make It Quick

1.1

I understand that some people have personal preferences, but I wouldn't say that I hope to have one.

Thinking back, I did not actually have a unique upbringing. While my father was rarely at home, he still managed to maintain the family. My sister was a rebellious, arrogant and strange person who quickly saved up money as soon as she entered college to escape on a long adventure, but it's not like she had six arms and three faces. And I, Oreki Houtarou, have not had any intense, life-changing experiences, as expected.

Once, I was involved in some trouble that no one should have been through before. During that period, I had no idea what was happening, but I got to know Fukube Satoshi, who is still a close friend. At that time, my sister said that it was a trivial matter that happens all the time, but I was really indignant that it should happen to me. In the time when I was busy twitching my eyebrows and complaining about everything being annoying or difficult, I had graduated from middle school without realizing it. Thinking back about it, however, I realise that they were indeed all insignificant matters.

My results at school were not bad. I was not a genius, but I was not so terrible at studies to be so worried about it. Aimlessly following most of those students in the Kamiyama City area with average results, I tried to get into Kamiyama High School. Studying for the examination was difficult, and yet to my expectations.

Kamiyama High was the perfect link between middle and high school. While it was the best school for further studies, it had an acceptance rate of more than 90%. Even considering the existence of private schools, most people who wanted to enter Kamiyama High were able to pass the test. I also somehow passed the test and got into Kamiyama High.

During the school entrance ceremony, I thought that Kamiyama High would also have various occurrences. I was sure that in my three years here, there

would be some eye-catching incidents.

However, everyone here, that is to say my peers, would have their own personal experiences that catch their attention, so I have not had the chance to say, “I see, this is something different” and show my pride. While I was leaving Kaburaya Middle School, I gazed upon the school building and muttered, “In the end, it seems that nothing special happened here.” I would probably say the same thing when I graduate from Kamiyama High three years later.

That is because I hold an unshakable motto.

No matter how much I try to think about it, I somehow cannot remember when I started following that motto. It was neither taught to me by someone, nor did I read it from somewhere. Even so, I hold firm to this motto.

It is...

If I don’t have to do it, don’t do it. If I have to do it, make it quick.

1.2

I like my motto from the bottom of my heart.

But because of that, I was thrown into a predicament after class. On my table there were two pieces of writing paper. The first had the topic "Feelings after the first month of school and future aspirations" written on it, while the second was blank. The guidance counseling department must have thought well of freshmen and believed that we could fill at least two pages with our aspirations. I sure am thankful for that.

Since this was homework, I had written it yesterday at home. I absolutely cannot remember exactly what I wrote, but I did complete it. So why do I have to stay behind after school and again face these questions which answers I cannot recall? Actually, this should be a surprising mystery, but if I had to summarize the cause in one sentence, it would be, "Sensei, I left my homework at home."

Satoshi laughed at my writing, which was stuck at three lines out of the two given pages.

"That's definitely the Houtarou who doesn't do optional things. I dare say it would be difficult for you to talk about aspirations. Then again, shouldn't you have at least done it more properly?"

Seems like you don't understand at all. I objected while holding my mechanical pencil between my fingers and spinning it.
"I did complete it last night."

"Then why are you having so much trouble with writing it a second time?"

"Because it's the second time."

Satoshi looked at me suspiciously.

I spun my pen again. Well, I was trying to spin it again, but as it was rotating with too much momentum, it grazed against Satoshi's face and flew off to a corner of the classroom. I calmly stood up, picked up my pencil and

went back to my seat while acting that nothing had happened. Satoshi put on a nonchalant air, as if wondering if something had happened.

“What’s so unpleasant about writing a second time?”

“I could write the first essay properly. I’m trying to make this second essay follow the first, but in the end I’m still unable to write it well.”

I had put in much effort last night to fabricate some aspirations. Throwing that away and writing from scratch was actually rather difficult. Satoshi smirked as if he was happy about something.

“Haha... I sort of get it. Then, why don’t you just recall what you wrote last night?”

“It’s precisely because I wrote it so well that I can’t remember.”

The bottom of the mechanical pencil hit the table with a clunk. Satoshi shrugged, as if the punch line of the joke had been delivered.

It was nearing the end of April. It was after school, but it wasn’t that late yet. Besides myself, there were still many others in the classroom, having their own private discussions. There was a slight drizzle outside, which had been going on for two or three days now. The weather forecast said that there would be heavy storms between the evening and night, but that’s not the only reason why I wanted to get home early.

Satoshi sat down at the corner of the table and peered into my purse, while spinning the drawstring bag he always carries around his shoulder.

“You sure look like you’re going to take a long time. You’re going for club activities, right?”

At the mention of the word “club”, I grimaced.

With the guidance of my motto, I would of course have no interest in joining any clubs. Since I’m aspiring for an easygoing high school life, why would I intentionally do something which requires so much energy?

But one letter threw my hopes into disarray. It was a letter from Benares,

India. “Join the Classics Club,” it said. Thanks to some bad luck and a reading error, I am now in the Classics Club, as instructed.

The person in front of me is Fukube Satoshi, a Classics Club member. On top of that, he’s also a Handicraft Society member as well as a member of the Executive Committee. He enjoys cycling. What a man of leisure.

“Chitanda-san is curious about something. She said it would be good if you could come.”

I fell silent and stared at the tip of my stationary pen.

Chitanda was also a member of the Classics Club. Her full name was Chitanda Eru.

According to Satoshi, the master of trivial information, Chitanda is the daughter of an old family which owns a large plot of farmland in the Northeast region of Kamiyama City. Her distinguished back ground isn’t really reflected by her appearance. She just simply looked like a really neat student in the same grade with long hair and a dainty face. Chitanda... upon hearing that name, I stayed silent without thinking. Was this noticed by Satoshi? Actually, it’s because I’m somehow not good with her.

I joined the Classics Club because I thought that it would be empty, but due to Chitanda also entering the club, it actually became a real club. But that’s not all.

She’s not exactly a type I dislike. An energy-saver like me doesn’t have strong likes and dislikes. But on the day we met, Chitanda asked this of me, “Why was I locked in that room... I’m really curious.”

That day, Chitanda was in a locked classroom, but had not noticed that she had been locked in herself. Being the one who unlocked the door, I was of course not the one who locked it. It is understandable to find it mysterious, but Chitanda just had to ask me to solve the mystery. Being overcome by her extremely strong request, I had to explain my thoughts on how it happened.

Thankfully, I somehow managed to show off my prowess that day.

However, after the truth of the matter had been revealed, I had a strange premonition on the road back home. My energy saving motto is unshakable. That's because no one would intentionally try to cause a complete stranger to waver from his insignificant beliefs. That is normal, and so was what Chitanda did that day. But... the phrase "I'm curious", together with Chitanda's huge eyes coming way too close. These have been ingrained deep in my memory, as a strange premonition of what's to come.

"I had Chitanda-san fill up the authorization request application form. All that troublesome paperwork is the professional duty of a loyal Executive Committee member like me."

"Sounds tough. By the way, how do you spell 'assiduous'?"[1]

"You don't get points for using words you forgot how to spell. How about replacing it with working hard or something?"

Satoshi is basically someone who says what he wants whenever he wants to, but he's definitely not an obtuse person. He let out a small sigh and spoke.

"Well, if you don't want to go, you don't have to force yourself to go for club activities."

I wouldn't say that I don't want to go. It's just that after school, for today at least, completing "Feelings after the first month of school and future aspirations" is more important than going off to the Classics Club. It was just my intention to put in more hard work as a proud student of Kamiyama High. Hmm, I think I won't be able to get my point across if I don't use the word "assiduous".

Ignoring my essay paper which had not filled up at all, Satoshi stifled a yawn. When I glanced outside, thinking I would see the never-ending spring rain, Satoshi suddenly turned towards me with a grin.

"Oh yeah, I just came across some interesting talk. Apparently, a clichéd rumor has been floating around. Have you heard of it?"

"Clichéd?"

I raised my head. The fact that I could be so easily distracted is proof of how bored I was with the essay. Satoshi nodded in a self-satisfied manner and raised his index finger with a snap.

“It’s totally clichéd. I had always wondered if Kamiyama High, the largest school for further studies in Kamiyama City, and home to many suspicious clubs, held any dark secrets or supernatural occurrences, but what I was really interested in was that such talk actually existed.”

“What’s with that finger?”

“Ah, sorry. No reason whatsoever.”

Satoshi quickly withdrew his index finger, but maintained the grin on his face. “Don’t you want to listen to the strange stories and suspicious rumors of the school?”

I fell silent, thinking of what to say, but Satoshi continued.

“In the dead of time after school[2], the piano starts playing on its own in the music room…”

“All right, that’s enough.”

I don’t think it’s interesting at all. I thrust out my palm and stopped him from telling his tale.

It is indeed clichéd. There was also this kind of talk in elementary and middle school. These school rumors may seem original, but they all have the same format. I wouldn’t say that I’m fed up with them, but I simply have no interest. I’m disappointed that Satoshi, as a man of many hobbies, has brought me some boring talk.

“You don’t understand, Houtarou. Do you actually think I find the commonplace ‘weird school stories’ interesting?”

I wonder about that. A while ago, you were interested in the structure of the postal life insurance.[3]

“You’re wrong. Isn’t it obvious that I’m more interested in the fact that this

rumor got started in the first place?"

"Oh?"

"There are three hundred and twenty first year students like us, wandering around aimlessly like pitiful lambs in a totally new environment. And just two weeks after entering school, we have become able to say 'It really exists in this school.' Don't you find this growth to be remarkable?"

Satoshi's hand widened, showing his joy.

I see. Now I understand what he's trying to say. I laid my right elbow on the table and rested my chin on my fist.

"That is indeed true. While familiarizing yourself in a new environment, there probably wouldn't be space for things like rumors to spread. You're trying to say that because people have become more accustomed to this school and started having more time, room for strange rumors was created, right?"

"Yes, exactly. You understood unexpectedly quickly."

"It reminds me of blood type divination."

As I accidentally blurted out my thoughts, the good-humored Satoshi suddenly stopped nodding.

"…Why do you say that?"

"It seems like a topic you would bring up in your very first meeting with someone. Both sides hardly understand the topic that they are encountering for the first time. In most cases, the conversation would flow smoothly and harmoniously but in reality, many people wouldn't believe a word."

Satoshi sucked in his breath and his eyes widened. I winced at the exaggerated response.

"What is it?"

"Well, I'm shocked!"

Satoshi exclaimed, and I sat up straighter.

“Houtarou actually criticized an interpersonal communication technique! I was beyond a doubt that Houtarou had shut his eyes to becoming a social animal!”

What a rude guy.

“I don’t dislike people. I can say that while looking you in the eye.”

I insinuated, while staring at Satoshi in the eye. Of course, Satoshi did not like that, and turned away.

“Fine, I understand. It’s just Houtarou conserving energy.”

Is that something strange?

“So, how about it? Would you like to listen to the symbol of the first years’ free time, the mystery of the music room?”

No matter what kind of tedious talk Satoshi brings, it’s not the case that I want to listen to it. It’s just that if I suddenly announce that I’m not interested, he would probably say something like, “As expected, you turn your back to the social situation, Houtarou. Trying to listen with interest no matter how boring the topic is the first step to a harmonious interpersonal relationship.’” Well, since I’m currently writing about my ambitions, it shouldn’t be a hindrance. I picked up my mechanical pencil, returned my attention to the questionnaire and said,

“If you want to tell your story so badly, I’m listening.”

“All right.”

Satoshi cleared his throat intentionally.

“It was yesterday. A first year girl went to the fourth floor of the Special Block.”

“It’s not Chitanda, is it?”

I had planned to not listen to the story, yet I responded to the first sentence.

Besides the music room, the Special Block also houses the geography lecture room, which is the Classics Club room.

Our first year classroom was on the fourth floor of the General Block. To get to the fourth floor of the Special Block, one would have to walk down three flights of stairs, then go through the roof passageway to the Special Block, then walk up to the fourth floor. On a rainy day like this, the roof passageway can't be used, so one would have to use the sheltered pathway on the ground floor. That is annoyingly far.

Actually, the fourth floor of the Special Block is a remote region of Kamiyama High. I can't think of any girl other than Chitanda who would intentionally go there.

Having been interrupted from the outset, Satoshi looked downhearted for an instant.

"No, it's not."

"Then, who is it?"

"Just listen."

It seems that I made him angry. Time to shut up.

"After school, the girl went to the fourth floor of the Special Block. It was almost six. Since the school gates are locked at six, there was hardly anyone still in school.

"As she was walking up from the third floor, she noticed the melody of the piano. For better or worse, this girl knew how to appreciate music. The music was amazing and the girl was overwhelmed by the abundant expression of the piece. It was a melody that one could easily get accustomed to. It was Moonlight Sonata. The girl was in the midst of taking something she forgot to bring, but being immersed in the music, she stopped there in a daze.

“The corridor, stairs and girl were painted crimson by the setting sun. It was as if the world had burst into flames and was about to burn up. The beautiful music was just like a requiem devoted to one’s last moments. Feeling a shaky feeling creep up from her feet, the girl actually…”

I had an objection to Satoshi’s story.

“It also rained yesterday, so there was no sunset.”

“Yes, the air was damp with the continuous rain, as dusk drew near. The feeling of discomfort coiled around the skin, as the noise of the rain faintly mixed with the music. The timbre of the music etched an inexplicable feeling of anxiety on the girl’s heart.”

What the hell…
It seems that Satoshi’s skill has not declined in the slightest.

“Kamiyama High is well-known for its artistic clubs. It isn’t strange to have a piano expert of this level. The girl wanted to give a compliment to the pianist, so she put her hand to the doorknob of the music room. There was indeed music coming from that room. Besides, where else would have a piano other than a music room?”

I believe there’s a piano in the gym that’s used for ceremonies. But I kept quiet, thinking that I should not pour cold water on Satoshi again.

“But the moment she was about to open the door, the music was suddenly interrupted. Wondering what had happened, the girl slowly opened the door."

While acting out the action of opening a door, Satoshi’s voice became soft. From the stifled voice, I knew that the scary part was imminent.

"After she did so, she went into the music room, which seemed to be filled with a bizarre atmosphere.

"All the curtains were closed, and it was pitch-black. The girl instantly looked at the piano, but there was no one there. The lid of the piano was up, yet there was no pianist. ‘Why?’ the girl thought as she faltered. She shifted

her gaze to her left and right, and then she saw it. A female student with long, messy hair drooping on her face and fiery, bloodshot eyes clad in a sailor uniform lurking in a corner of the music room!"

With his hands clasped together, Satoshi shook with indignation. What a detailed act.

"Having been stirred up by a hair-raising event, the girl fled immediately without turning her head. Later, the girl found out that on that day, the piano club had sole possession of the music room. Also, the only person in the piano club, who was a third year student, had unfortunately injured her finger, and couldn't have played the piano!

"But Houtarou! It is also impossible for the piano to play a tune by itself. Unless you consider the piano club member who regretfully committed suicide before the National Competition…"

"Someone committed suicide?"

Satoshi put on a serious look as he neared the summary of the story. This solo performance has taken longer than usual.

"I guess. It probably happened, but I'm not sure."

For some reason, my writing pace had actually increased while I was listening to Satoshi's nonsense. Perhaps my writing ability is connected to my mental state when ignoring him. I spoke without even looking up.

"It was actually you who knew about the piano club's possession of the music room as well as its sole member, right?"

Satoshi seemed to give off the feeling of a bitter laugh.

"Brilliant deduction, Houtarou. That's right. The piano club president, Tamaru Junko, is currently undergoing treatment for her index finger."

I wouldn't know the girl student witness, let alone the events in the piano club. But Satoshi would. As a member of the Executive Committee, he would have detailed knowledge of the clubs in Kamiyama High.

Satoshi's pompous tone changed into one of amusement.

"It seems that there really was a ghost-like girl student wearing a sailor uniform with messy hair. The first-year girl who witnessed it was probably scared or shocked, but during today's lunch break, this incident was being talked about in class A."

"It's obvious that she was wearing a sailor uniform."

At any rate, male students in Kamiyama High had to wear the gakuran, while female students had to wear the sailor uniform. I would be surprised if there were female students wearing blazers or smocks.

"The question is, will this story spread? If it does, how and at what speed would it propagate? If you document the process of circulation, it would probably become the basic material for folklore research. It will be called 'The Second of Kamiyama High's Seven Mysteries'. At present, I wonder when it would reach my class D."

Satoshi said it jokingly, but he was fairly drawn to the idea. Indeed, isn't Satoshi just the person to have a deep interest in something like the means by which rumors propagate?

But I did not have time to be concerned with Satoshi's research. There was something in Satoshi's words that I could not let go.

"Wait a minute. What did you just say?"

"Hmm? Folklore. Well, you could also call it urban legend. By saying folklore, I was trying to instil a sort of nuance…"

"No, that's not it."

On seeing my countenance suddenly change, Satoshi also looked dubious.

"What's the matter? Did you really find the strange tale of 'The Moonlight Sonata Piano' that interesting? I sure didn't expect Houtarou to have an interest in such a thing…"

I didn't really care about the story. But if what Satoshi said was true…

This is no simple matter. Some action is needed to deal with it.

It all depends on the questionnaire in front of me, “Feelings after the first month of school and future aspirations” If I can finish writing this quickly, there would be no problems.

However, as I thought about hurrying up, my mechanical pencil just got stuck and the words just wouldn’t appear. If I have to do it, make it quick. However, just like there are situations when it is possible to do things quickly, there are also times when that is impossible.

1.3

The rain would not stop.

While listening to Satoshi's detailed story, I was intent on filling up the questionnaire. I finally finished writing my ambitions for the second time and was just thinking that I would be able to go home, when a person with fluttering black hair appeared in the classroom.

"Ah, you're still here, Oreki-san."

An almost non-existent smile surfaced on my eyes and mouth. This person was the Classics Club president, Chitanda Eru, a female student who lacked elegance but was undoubtedly a beauty. She was walking straight towards me, causing those classmates who were still in the classroom to give me meaningful looks all at once. Well, I guess that's understandable.

I pointed in the direction of the blackboard.

"Your classroom is over there."

I was in class 1-B. Chitanda was in 1-A. But she just smiled and said,

"Yes, that's true."

She was already close enough, but she drew closer by another half a meter and stopped. She then took out a handout from the clear file in her hand.

"I've filled up the form, Fukube-san."

"Ah, many thanks. This form is really unnecessary no matter how you look at it."

Come to think of it, Satoshi did mention that Chitanda was in her classroom completing some paperwork. Since it was called the authorization request application form, I initially thought it was a joke, but it seems that she was really writing something. I glanced at it, but only saw that it was titled "Club Application Confirmation Form".

Satoshi retrieved a leather-bound notebook from his drawstring bag, folded the form twice and placed it in the notebook. After witnessing that, Chitanda turned to look at me. Her huge eyes betrayed her neat image. Her pupils dilated, and her look made me feel hot.

I recognize those pupils and eyes. It was only this straight look of Chitanda that could cause the energy-saver Oreki Houtarou to solve mysteries. Since the day I met Chitanda in the Classics Cub room, I had not experienced this again. We didn't really have many chances to speak personally, after all. But I had a hunch. Here it comes.

Before her lips could open, I quickly spoke.

"You came at a good time."

"Huh?"

Having lost her momentum, Chitanda blinked. Using the excess energy from the sense of liberation from completing that annoying questionnaire, I laughed with extreme lightheartedness.

"I've just heard a strange story from Satoshi. It's a really weird rumor."

"Are you talking about that incident?"

…As expected.

"Have you heard of the 'Secret Club Invitation Memo'? It's known as 'The First of Kamiyama High's Seven Mysteries'."

Again, Chitanda's huge eyes blinked repeatedly.

For a moment, her lips narrowed in doubt. She then linked her hands together in front of her chest and her usual smile returned.

"Hmm? What's this about a secret club? Is this true?"
"I didn't believe it at first, but instead of listening from me…"

I turned to look at Satoshi.

“Satoshi, tell her the story.”

“Ah, okay.”

Trying to digest the course of events, Satoshi hesitated for a while. Satoshi took a slight glance at me, and I waved my hand while smiling, urging him to speak.

As expected of Fukube Satoshi. He didn’t refuse when I asked him to speak. Satoshi sat up straighter on the table, and took on a more cheerful tone.

“Right, thank you for listening to the story of ‘The Secret Club’… The Executive Committee is also in charge of freshman invitations. This is what I heard when I was there,” he began.

“In any case, Kamiyama High has too many clubs and societies. Since there are so many clubs, there would obviously be many invitation posters. In the first school term, the notice boards in school would probably be overflowing with these posters. Of course, using the notice boards require permission. If you do not get the stamp of approval from the Executive Committee, you cannot stick your poster on the notice board.

“Nonetheless all it needs is a piece of paper and one thumb tack. If we do not patrol frequently, pirated versions of invitation posters appear. It is also the duty of Executive Committee members to tear down such posters when we see them. There is a penalty for legitimate clubs which put up these pirated posters. At the worst, their club funds could be cut.”

“…That was unexpectedly severe.”

“That’s right! It’s really quite serious.”

Having been quickly taken in by Satoshi’s flowing speech, Chitanda nodded her head repeatedly while listening.

“But then, every year, there is just one invitational poster from an unknown club. Well, I guess it’s more of a memo than a poster. Anyway, last year, there was a piece of paper that looked like it was cut out from a notebook detailing the time and place to meet. The memo on the notice board was not

officially recognised, and needless to say, the club was also illegal. The Executive Committee President, Tanabe, then realized that there was a secret club that the Executive Committee did not have a hold on and that the club was holding secret gatherings.

“The purpose of the club and the identity of its members were unknown, but they knew what the club’s name was.”

“And what was it?”

Satoshi laughed while bearing a broad grin.

“The Silk Spider Society.”

“Silk Spider…”

Chitanda repeated that phrase a few times, trying to digest it. Suddenly, she said, “I often see their nests at my house garden.”

You can actually tell the species of spider just by looking at its nest?

“Based on the confiscated memo, Tanabe-senpai tried to get in contact with the Silk Spider Society, but it did not go well. The designated spot was an empty classroom, and on top of that no one could enter without a key. As Chitanda-san would know, it is impossible to borrow the key without a valid reason. With that, Tanabe-senpai concluded that the Silk Spider Society did not actually exist. He believed that the memo on the notice board was just a prank of a childish student. But then…”

Since he had reached the climax of his story, Satoshi put emphasis on his words.

“On the day of graduation, one of the graduates said to Tanabe-senpai, ‘…I was the president of the Silk Spider Society. Please also take care of the next club president. If you can find him, that is.’

“The newly-appointed Executive Committee president, Tanabe-senpai, had no intention of allowing any unapproved objects on the notice boards. They are probably also holding a gathering this year. The Executive Committee

members are keeping their eyes peeled, but they still have not found it as of yet…”

Satoshi shrugged, ending his story.

Like the music room story just now, Satoshi modulated his voice without creating a relatively unnatural feeling. I have known Satoshi for a long time, but I never knew that he could tell a story so well. This guy would probably be a silent cinema narrator in the future.

Chitanda let out a small sigh.

“There is indeed such a strangely large variety of clubs in this school. It wouldn’t be surprising to have a mystery club among all of them.”

Indeed, compared to normal full-day general education schools, Kamiyama High’s culture-related clubs are too diverse. There are over fifty different clubs, from the Acapella Club to the Magic Society, and in autumn, the three-day Cultural Festival will start. It would seem comparatively inelegant not to have one or two mystery clubs. I replied,

“The Silk Spider Society? If you take into consideration the fact that its purpose is unknown, it is quite similar to the Classics Club.”

“The Classics Club is not like that!”

Chitanda exclaimed, but after some silent thought, Chitanda could not agree with her previous statement.

“I can’t really say that they are dissimilar…”

Which reminds me, Chitanda said that she joined the Classics Club for a special reason. She said that it was some personal matter, so I have not questioned her further.

“One single memo in the midst of countless invitation posters, huh?”

Chitanda held her head in her hands and thought for a while. With her eyes staring fixedly into the distance, she looked like a refined young lady.

But soon after, with one large nod, Chitanda's emotions cleared up in a flash. She put her hands in front of her chest and said,

"That's right… I'm curious!"

Right.

With the questionnaire paper in my hand, I stood up.

"I thought you would say that, that's why I said that you came at a good time."

"What do you mean?"

Chitanda shrugged curiously.

"Of course, we're going to find the memo."

First, I asked Satoshi about the number of notice boards the Executive Committee is responsible for.

As expected, Fukube Satoshi had not tallied the number.

"Hang on a sec."

He muttered, and began counting.

"There are two boards on each floor from the second to the fourth floor of the Normal Block. On the first floor, there are also boards at the infirmary and staff room, so there is a total of four boards. There are also boards at the passageway. On the second floor passageway, there is one near the Normal Block and another near the Special Block. There is one board on each floor of the Special Block. This brings it to a total of sixteen.

"Also, there is one board per landing. In that case, since a building has four floors and two flights of stairs per floor, there would be another sixteen boards."

Since I only wanted to hear the grand total, I ignored the calculation, but Chitanda did not do that. To Satoshi who had bent his finger too much, lost

count and was just staring at his fist, Chitanda gently said,

“That’s wrong, Fukube-san. If a building has four floors and two flights of stairs between floors, there would be twelve landings altogether… since a four storey building has three landings.”

“Er… Ah… That’s right.”

He bent his finger again. His hand somehow turned into a shape that a suspicious rapper would be envious of.

“And that brings the total to…”

“Twenty-eight boards.”

Satoshi looked amazed.

“One notice board can fit at least ten posters regardless of size. As a result, this small school would have at least three hundred posters.”

“Isn’t there also a notice board in the gym?”

“Now that I think about it, there is indeed one there. And there’s also one in the Martial Arts building… so there are thirty locations in total. The Executive Committee is certainly putting a lot of hard work. What a great committee this is!”

Satoshi looked up at the ceiling and exclaimed with emotion.

Surprisingly, Chitanda ignored Satoshi, who was overcome with emotion. Without commenting or even giving him a cold remark, she merely shifted her gaze. Did she already discover the method of dealing with Satoshi even though they have only met a few times? Obviously, that was true.

Chitanda turned to look at me.

“It seems that there are thirty locations in total… Do we search all of them?”

As if. Doing that will betray my belief and cause me to die as punishment.

“Wouldn’t it be better to consider where it would be first? Which is the most suspicious spot? It’s not too late to use our feet only after thinking about it.”

“Mayaka was talking about it before.”

Satoshi replied, with a mocking look on his face.

“’That Houtarou always uses his head before using his body,’ she said.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“As a result, you usually end up not using your body at all.”

Of course, I could not refute that.

Mayaka refers to Ibara Mayaka. For some reason, I’ve been in the same class as her from elementary school. Now that I think about it, we entered different classes for the first time in high school. She was not especially friendly with me, but she had a really close relationship with Satoshi. They say there’s no accounting for taste, but Ibara has a crush on Satoshi.

“Who is Mayaka-san?”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll have the chance to introduce you eventually.”

Satoshi has been confessed to many times, but he has never accepted her. I have no idea why, and I have no interest in finding out. Anyway, as Mayaka had pointed out, I was now using my head.

“Suspicious places… In other words, if a secret club put up a memo, where would be its most likely location, right?”

“What conditions do you think the location should fulfill in general?”

I asked. Chitanda thought a little and answered with upturned eyes.

“If it is seen by an Executive Committee member, it would be taken down. If it were me… I would definitely place it in some corner of the school, where it wouldn’t stand out. For example, the area around the geography

lecture room would do, since hardly anyone walks past."

"Well, I guess. For the notice board at the Martial Arts building, the memo wouldn't be spotted if any related club members or Executive Committee members were not present."

Satoshi agreed.

But there would be a problem if the memo was in such a corner of the school. I declared with as much self-confidence as I could muster,

"That's wrong."

One should not do what he is unused to. From the corner of my eyes, I noticed Satoshi frown, and I wondered if I had been excessively blunt. But then Satoshi was not the problem. It seems that the concerned Chitanda did not find anything strange at all.

"Is it wrong?"

"You were not mistaken at first."

I took a breath and added,

"If the Silk Spider Society's invitational memo has been put up… it would be at the entrance to the staircase on the first floor, or at any of the landings between the first and fourth floors."

Chitanda tilted her head.

"In other words, you think that it is somewhere on the route that first year students would use, right? But that's…"

She murmured, pondering about it. If I had an better understanding of language skills, I would be able to explain faster, but unfortunately, I do not have Satoshi's speech techniques. I was trying to recall what to say next, when Satoshi butted in.

"Well, well. It seems that Houtarou has thought of something. Chitanda-san's theory is that it is in a corner of the campus, while Houtarou's theory

is that it is along the first year's line of movement. Now that we have determined the two sides of the coin, wouldn't it be faster if we go check it out?"

On hearing the suggestion, Chitanda's started moving quickly. She turned back and exclaimed,

"Then, let's go!"

I nodded, and carried the school designated shoulder bag on my shoulder. I met Satoshi's eyes for a fleeting moment, and he turned away, whistling.

1.4

“Which middle school were you from?”

Since entering high school, I have been asked this question countless times, but this is the first time I am asking this question. Chitanda has also probably been questioned about this repeatedly, but she answered without a hint of reluctance.

“I was from Inji Middle School. Fukube-san and Oreki-san were from the same middle school, right?”

“Yeah.”

Satoshi’s voice came from behind.

“Fukube Satoshi and Oreki Houtarou were known as the Earth, Wind and Fire in Kaburaya Middle School.”

Who? Where? What are you talking about?

It goes without saying that I was not well-known in middle school, but Satoshi was. He used to be the Student Council treasurer.

Chitanda and I went down the stairs in a line, while Satoshi followed behind. After school, as the day gradually became cloudy, there would be a large amount of traffic at the staircase. We did not spread out horizontally so as to avoid being a hindrance.

On the landing between the third and fourth floors, there was a notice board with posters of various colors competing for attention. Each club was devoted to different directions of design, producing a chaotic atmosphere. Chitanda pointed at a particular poster.

“I like this one.”

That poster was circular, and boldly occupied a large amount of space. Below the simple invitation “Would you like to join the Handicraft Society?” was a knitted panda. It was not drawn, but was embroidered. The

embroidered panda was stuck onto the circular paper as part of the invitational poster. I was overwhelmed just imagining the amount of time and labor that was used. Why would someone go so far…

Seeing that I couldn't say anything, Satoshi put his hand on my shoulder.

"What do you think, Houtarou? Seeing this detailed craftsmanship that totally opposes your energy-saving belief, you can feel the determination and workmanship of the artists, but you can't say a word about it."

"I think that experiencing different cultures is always exciting."

"I'm really glad about your honest opinion."

Satoshi nodded deeply, turned to Chitanda and stuck out his chest.
"I also got interested in that, so I joined the Handicraft Society."

"Eh?"

Chitanda became speechless. It seems that she was unaware.

If Chitanda continues interacting with Satoshi from now on, she would probably come to know of his active personality. Sooner or later, she would come to think, "Does Fukube Satoshi have any constancy at all?"

After Chitanda touched the notice board, a poster sagged by a large amount.

"Ah, has the thumb tack fallen off?"

Chitanda leant over and searched the floor, but she could not find the thumb tack.

"…Anyway, it doesn't seem to be here. Let's move on."

We then went to investigate the landing between the third and second floor, as well as the landing between the second and first floor.

Decorative words, tasteful slogans, intricate craft, and various illustrations ranging from the realistic to manga style. All kinds of work to attract freshmen were displayed in front of us. There was no limit to the variety of

club activities. The Ink Painting Club had painted a landscape, the Manga Studies Club had illustrated a four-frame manga, the Shogi Club and Go Club had presented their respective chess puzzles, and the Marching Band Club had pictures of their gala performance. Kamiyama High's slightly embarrassing physical activity clubs were also not letting up, for the Basketball Club, Volleyball Club, Track-and-Field Club and Baseball Club were inviting students under the delusion that they were the most appropriate place for all high school students to pour their energies into.

"Ahh, looking at it again, Kamiyama High is really awesome!"

"You're right. You cannot even see the board of the notice boards."

Taking a backward glance at the two who were having fun commenting on each poster, I felt that I had made a mistake tagging along with them.

These were posters that I pass by everyday, posters that I have seen tens of times.

However, facing them head-on, I was affected by the energy that I wanted to run away from, and I felt dizzy.

Despite that, we somehow managed to descend to the first floor.

We were in front of the entrance to the staircase that all first years use. The notice board there was the most disordered one we had seen.

Satoshi laughed and said,

"This is the first notice board that freshmen see. This is the prime location, so it's a warzone here."

Is this notice board really cared for properly by the Executive Committee? There was not a single poster of normal size. The notice board was filled with recruitment posters the size of postcards. Because this is the prime location, it is shared by many clubs. I see this everyday on the path to and from class, but I'm still not used to its chaos.

In front of this mess, Chitanda somehow seemed to have reached an

understanding.

“Ah, I see. So that’s how it is.”

I looked over my shoulder and grinned.

“I still don’t understand why Oreki-san thinks that the notice boards that attract public attention are suspicious, but with so many posters here, an unauthorized notice would be hard to spot.”

In other words, the best place to hide a stick is a forest.
For an instant, I wanted to show my pride and say, “Of course, that is the reason," but that would just be showing off. I’ll just be honest here.

“… Ah, sorry. I did not consider this. I forgot that the notice board here was in such a state.”

“Eh? Then why?”

“I’ll say it only if it’s actually here. If it’s not here, I’ll be too ashamed to answer.”

Chitanda touched her lower lip with her finger and smiled. She stood in front of the notice board and said, “It would be troubling if we cannot find it, then. Just now, Oreki-san was strangely confident that it would be there. I would really like to know why!”

That was a little exaggerated… Speaking of which, it seems that Chitanda already knows that it’s not like me to have a self-confident attitude, although we haven’t talked very much.

With her large eyes widening even more, Chitanda perused the notice board. I couldn’t help but feel uneasy at her eyesight that seemed to be able to see through the back of a page. She probably isn’t very intuitive and sharp, but she was by far the best at memory and observation. At our first meeting, I didn’t even know of Chitanda’s existence, but she even knew my full name. That was the result of strong memory and observation. On the other hand, it was difficult for me to remember everything about this notice board.

“Global Act Club, Debate Club, and there’s also the Hyakunin Isshu Club[4] Ah, the Fortune Telling Club! I have a friend who joined that club.”

Chitanda started looking from the top right corner of the notice board and moved to the left, lowering her gaze and shifting to the right against when she reached the end, as if reading a catalog.

“So, I suppose it’s there?”

Satoshi asked. Chitanda was so focused on the notice board before her that she did not notice the irony in that question. “Kato Music Club, Table Tennis Club, Arts Society… nope.”

Chitanda groaned, as she straightened her body, which was bent forward.

“It seems that the Silk Spider Society’s invitational memo is not here.”

Chitanda gave a bitter smile filled with disappointment.

Seeing this expression for the first time, a feeling of guilt welled up within me.

“If you think about it, we do not know whether this secret club has put up their memo as of now, so Oreki-san was not wrong.”

So, she even used these comforting words.

Unexpectedly, I felt like apologising to Chitanda. This is not due to my weakness. It’s just that Satoshi and I, whether we wish to or not, view things with a pinch of salt, but Chitanda seems to totally disregard that inclination. She should be a little more doubtful, in my opinion. Does she even consider that there are wheels within wheels, or if she is being cheated? It can’t be true that Chitanda is just a fool, right? Despite that, why hasn’t she doubted me? I think I may have taken this farce too far. But then the plan has progressed thus far without a hitch. Having gone too far to retreat, I can only proceed with the plan. Thankfully, Satoshi’s voice came from behind Chitanda.

“I wonder about that. I think it should be there, though. You can’t really tell

if it’s there just by looking.”

“What do you mean?”

Chitanda turned around and asked in return.

“I think that it would take some effort to do things behind the Executive Committee’s back. Well, whatever. If it’s been put up we’ll find it eventually.”

Satoshi shrugged with one shoulder.

“But more importantly, I also want to know why Houtarou thought that it would be in the middle of the first years’ line of movement.” “… Ah, you too? Alright.”

I replied with a toneless voice. I probably sound unexpectedly down.

I asked wile aimlessly moving my hands,

“Hey, Satoshi, if you had to hide an object in school where would you choose?”

Satoshi probably didn’t expect that question to suddenly appear, for his response was slow.

“Hide something? Well, I guess it depends on size. Assuming certain conditions are met… I would choose the empty classroom in front of the staff toilets on the first floor of the Normal Block. No one goes there.”

“Besides that?”

“Some Japanese-style room, I suppose, since only the Tea Ceremony Society would use it.”

“I see. Then, where would you hide it in Kaburaya Middle School?”

Satoshi’s response was even slower. “That’s obvious,” he said, and grinned.

“Ah… I see.”

“That’s how it is.”

We exchanged phrases that made us seem like partners-in-crime.

“I think I understand what you’re getting at, Houtarou. It certainly seems to be the case.”
“Eh, what are you talking about? Is there really such a suitable hiding place in Kaburaya Middle School?”

Chitanda, who had been left out, edged into the conversation with large curiosity and slight dissatisfaction.

“I wouldn’t call it a really suitable hiding place. The first place that comes to mind is the pantry. A large crowd of people visit every day, but no one pays much attention.”

Chitanda still did not understand the explanation. She did not know the difference between the pantry and the Japanese-style room. I said straightforwardly,

“Satoshi wanted to hide the object in a remote location in Kamiyama High. However, when it came to Kaburaya Middle School, he actually wanted to hide it in a crowded place. What about you? If you had to hide something in Inji Middle School, wouldn’t you pick a hiding spot which everyone sees but does not look at?”

“Ah…”

Chitanda took a breath and brought her palms to her mouth.

“You’re right. I do not know why, but I would not hide it in a corner.”

“The question is whether you’re familiar with the place.”

I declared.

“We are still quite unfamiliar with Kamiyama High and think of it as a new place. Since we are not use to this new environment, we choose to hide things in secluded areas. On the other hand, we spent those three years in

middle school and we know every nook and cranny in the school building. Because of that, we think that it is better to boldly take advantage of blind spots, rather than hide the object from public notice inexpertly.

“Even if you hide something in unusual places like the Japanese-style rooms and empty classrooms, the occasional visitor might be watchful of his surroundings. Since people still go to these remote areas, it would be considered risky to leave objects there. As a result, the Silk Spider Society would distance itself from such locations.”

“I see!” Satoshi exclaimed.

“So it would be at the staircase entrance, huh. Indeed, there is no place in the school that no student would visit. If that’s the case, it’s just as Chitanda said earlier, ‘You hide a corpse in a battlefield.’”

That’s one disturbing illustration, but it’s true.

“The more inexperienced one is, the more he displays the unconventional. There are no first year students in the Silk Spider Society. A mystery club worth its salt would have seen through that without hesitation.”

Chitanda seemed like she was deeply moved. With an unbearably serious face, she took a deep breath, ruminated on what I had just said for a while, then nodded slowly.

“Indeed, that is natural. It was naïve of me to think that it would be hidden at a corner of the school. It seems really unnatural that the memo is not on the notice board, though.”

“Well, something’s that’s not there doesn’t exist. Houtarou’s confidence can’t always be relied on.”

Satoshi joked as he moved towards the notice board. Then…

“… Hmm?”

He stopped in his tracks. All of a sudden, his face became serious once more and he reached out to a postcard affixed to the notice board. It was a

large postcard that seemed to be asserting itself in a group of slightly smaller postcards.

“That’s by the Baseball Club, right?”

“Yeah, that’s it. But don’t you think it’s a little out of place?”
Satoshi gave a half-hearted reply as he turned over the postcard.

Underneath the postcard, there was a small, torn piece of essay paper fixed to the board. On its front surface, there was text that had been aligned with a ruler. The words which had been written by a black felt-tip pen read:

“Silk Spider Society Two Members Required 05021722LL”

“So it was there… It’s strange, but after hearing your explanation, I felt it was natural that it would be there, so I was not surprised at all.”

Chitanda, who was more taken aback than surprised, said. On the other hand, Satoshi was staring intently at the contents of the memo with almost no expression.

And then, he said slowly,

“Executive Committee Authorization Stamp, no check. Now, time to do my job…”

And destroyed the memo.

While we were searching for the memo, many first year students walked by in front of our eyes. They were all putting on their shoes at the staircase entrance, and starting on their journey back home.

I said.

“I’m somewhat relieved. I have to go to the staff room to submit my homework, and I’ll go home after that.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ll head home too.”

Chitanda looked blank for while, but immediately smiled.

“Alright. Then this is farewell… ‘The more inexperienced one is, the more he displays the unconventional.’ I shall remember that.” With that parting phrase, Chitanda waved her hand in front of her chest.

5[edit]

Contrary to the weather forecast, the intensity of the rain gradually decreased. Satoshi and I held umbrellas and started walking back home. On the way, we passed through a shopping district with an arcade, and we finally managed to close our umbrellas. Satoshi broke the silence.

“I thought that something was off from the start.”

His voice was thick with amazement, sarcasm, and to some extent, criticism.

“After hearing about ‘The Moonlight Sonata Piano’, you suddenly asked ‘By the way, what’s the first of Kamiyama High’s Seven Mysteries?’ I was thinking, did Houtarou actually turn the conversation around?”

“I am much obliged.”

I said. Actually, the key was Satoshi surmising my intentions and helping me out. If not for that, I don’t think it would have gone that smoothly.

Satoshi turned his umbrella in a circle. It was a grey, fashionable umbrella with a checked pattern. It was totally different compared to my vinyl umbrella. The drops of rain pattered on the walkway we were walking through.

“The plan of ‘Controlling a Mystery with Another Mystery’ was amazing.”

Right.

There was just one reason why I purposely brought up the story of the Silk Spider Society. That was to cause Chitanda to be unable to bring up the mystery of the Moonlight Sonata Piano.

According to Satoshi, it was yesterday when a female student from class 1-

A heard the piano at the music room. That apparently became the talk of 1-A at around lunchtime today, but it hadn't spread to Satoshi's class, 1-D, yet.

There was one phrase by Satoshi that I could not ignore. That was "I wonder when it would reach my class D." If he was wondering when the story would become the talk of his class, he must not have heard it from his classmates.

Then, when, where and from whom did Satoshi get the story?

There was no need to even think about it. Before coming to my classroom, Satoshi was in the Classics Club room, the Geography Lecture room. Chitanda was in that very room filling up the authorization request application firm. Chitanda is a student of class 1-A.

Ergo, Satoshi had obviously heard it from Chitanda.

Another point was that Chitanda wanted to come to my classroom. That gave me a premonition. I didn't know if it was a good or bad premonition, but this is what I thought: Since I had solve The Mystery of the Locked Room, wouldn't Chitanda want me to solve the mystery behind the Moonlight Sonata Piano?

I thought that I was over-thinking. I could count the number of times I had met Chitanda. I don't think that I've done anything to show that I can be relied on, and my assumption that Chitanda wanted to come to my classroom in order to tell me the story could be wrong.

But, while I had doubts about my premonition, I had to prepare for Chitanda's arrival. The best case scenario was that I left before Chitanda reached my classroom. But then I had to stay back to complete the homework, which I had forgotten to bring. I could not return home freely, so I thought of counter-measures.

Then, Chitanda finally arrived.

Her main motive was to hand in the form to Satoshi, but the fact was that she came. I did not want to be concerned with the story of the music room, so I thought of fighting that curiosity with curiosity in another topic.

Specifically, ‘the First of Kamiyama High’s Seven Mysteries’. The scheme was successful. Chitanda was clearly about to mention the story of the music room, but her interest was diverted to the secret club.

Satoshi spoke.

“I understand what you did, but I don’t understand why. What were you planning when you replaced the mystery of the Moonlight Sonata Piano with the story of the Silk Spider Society? It can’t be that you wanted to escape because that mystery was beyond your powers, right?”

That is, of course, wrong.

Also, it’s not what I wanted to do, but I didn’t have a choice.

“About the piano story, I formed a conclusion immediately after hearing it. You can check if it’s true if you go to the music room.”

“Then, why?”

If you need a reason, all I have is one sentence.

“The music room is far away.”

The light rain hit the vinyl room of the arcade and made a rustling sound. A lightweight truck drove through the narrow road of the shopping district in a constrained manner. A spray of water soaked my shoes.

Then, Satoshi took a really deep breath.

“… I see. I get it now. As expected from Houtarou.”

The music room was on the fourth floor of the Special Block. To get there on a rainy day, one would have to go down to the ground floor, use the sheltered pathway and then climb up to the fourth floor. It’s really far from my classroom.

The weather forecast said that the rain would become stronger in the evening. I had absolutely no interest in going somewhere far like the music

room.

That is exactly why I brought up the story of the secret club. The First of Kamiyama High's Seven Mysteries, which I asked Satoshi to present, was extremely appropriate material to draw Chitanda's attention. I would then suggest searching for the memo, go to the staircase entrance and go home when it was over. Thus the plan was set.

Whatever was up with the piano in the music room, it was not a topic for me to be involved in. If I don't have to do it, don't do it. But, when Chitanda says "I'm curious!" with those blue eyes…

"If I have to do it, make it quick."

In short, I managed to get it over with as quickly as possible.

However, Satoshi was singing a different tune.

"Houtarou, that's not a good thing."

"…" "If you want to announce your motto, your should do it magnificently and with pride. Now, you're just making an excuse."

I can't reply to that.

On the contrary, I also could not look at Satoshi in the face. With the hushed pitter-patter of the spring rain, I could only stare at my soaked feet.

I love my motto from my heart.

But today, I don't feel any satisfaction from facing problem after problem with my belief. Instead, only guilt remains in my heart as I wonder if I had done the right thing.

The trick had gone well. Chitanda was persuaded to go down to the staircase entrance, and she also had admiration for the paradoxical explanation. Also, while Satoshi was drawing attention, I managed to secretly stick the Silk Spider Society invitational memo onto the notice board.

The memo was made from a scrap of essay paper. They had given two

sheets of essay paper for the high-spirited freshmen to write “Feelings after the first month of school and future aspirations.” Obviously, there was no way I could write two whole pages for that. Thus, I put the leftover sheet of essay paper to good use.

I appropriated the thumb tack from the staircase landing. When Chitanda saw the dislodged poster and thought that the thumb tack had fallen off, it was actually already in my hand.

Everything had gone as planned. I prevented the story of the piano from being told, and I thus managed to return home, as I had hoped. But now, even I recognise that my motto seems like an excuse. There is no room for argument. Even while the plan was being carried out, I was thinking that I should stop. I want to get home quickly, and I don’t want to go to the music room. Alright, the goal is justifiable. But what about the method?

The arcade came to an end, and we came to an intersection. I would have to hold my umbrella from here on. Satoshi stopped, peered at my face and let out a strange laugh.

“Houtarou, do you understand your basic fallacy today?”

I think that I know what it is, but I don’t think I’m absolutely right. I stayed silent.

Satoshi shrugged with forced grandeur.

“Fighting a mystery with a mystery. Yeah, I like it. It’s a good twist.”

And then, just like I had done to him earlier, Satoshi stared into my eyes and spoke.

“But that’s not to your taste.”

I quietly looked away.

“If you really wanted to conform to your motto, there was only one thing to do. It can’t be helped that you forgot your homework and had to stay back. Chitanda’s arrival was also not your fault. But why didn’t you just say ‘I

don’t know’? That, is your fallacy.

“No matter what topic Chitanda came up with, it was not your duty to find the answers. You could half-heartedly listen and then ignore it. Actually, isn’t that what you’ve always done?”

… That is indeed true.

Why did I even think of blocking a problem with a problem? That was definitely better than going to the music room, but that was unmistakably a time-consuming method.

Why did I choose to do that?

Satoshi’s words stung, but they were not without truth. If I had really wanted to shun Chitanda’s attack, couldn’t I have ended it by just saying “No idea”?

Satoshi’s strange smile became even deeper.

“I’m glad to be able to teach you something other than miscellaneous knowledge. Alright, Houtarou? I know exactly why you chose to do that.”

“……”

“That’s because… ‘The more inexperienced one is, the more he displays the unconventional.’”

This phrase sure rings a bell.

I think I know why Satoshi’s smile seems weird when I should have been used to it. The only part of him smiling was his mouth.

“Houtarou still isn’t familiar with the situation that he belongs to the Classics Club, which Chitanda-san is in. That’s the reason. That’s why you used such a roundabout method. You probably planned to reject Chitanda-san today. But in my eyes, that was not a rejection.”

“I didn’t exactly want to reject her.”

I did think that Chitanda was a nuisance, but it's not like I wanted to sever all connections with her and never see her again.

"Of course. That was only a deferment of the status quo."

Deferment.

That's a word that mysteriously made sense. To deal with Chitanda's arrival, the display of her unparalleled curiosity and the time I would have to spend, I chose deferment. That word is seriously apt in this situation.

I also knew what comes after that.

As if washing his hands of my situation, Satoshi looked up at the sky and opened his umbrella with a bang.

Satoshi carried his checked umbrella on his shoulder and walked out in the rain. Satoshi's house is just straight ahead. Mine is after the turn. The pedestrian crossing signal was still red.

In the end, Satoshi turned around.

"By the way, what do you think about 'The Moonlight Sonata Piano'? Don't worry, I won't tell you to go all the way to the music room."

"Ah."

In this wet drizzle, I shouldn't be feeling thirsty, yet I licked my lips. I looked at Satoshi's feet.

"It was before six, when the school gate closes. There was one female student with an injured hand in the music room. She had messy hair and bloodshot eyes… because she had just woken up."

"Ah, really?"

"The piano club member slept because she was tired. To ensure that she woke up before six, she set an alarm. She placed 'Moonlight Sonata' in the CD player."

Satoshi sniggered.

“I see. Kamiyama High has vigorous club activities, after all. Of course there would be a CD player in the music room! You would definitely understand if you went there, since the CD player would still have the same setting. Ah, you sure destroyed my dreams! I shouldn’t have asked.

“But Houtarou…”

The signal turned green. There was a tune which indicated that it was safe to proceed. Satoshi took one step and spoke, his words sounding like that of a prophecy.

“I think going to the music room would have helped you fulfil your motto in the long run. Today’s unsolved mystery will come with great interest. I have no intention of pursuing the matter, but what about Chitanda-san? Well, I’ll be going now. See you tomorrow.”

2 - To Commit A Deadly Sin

2.1

We were learning about China's history in our World History class. Unfortunately, I already knew a lot about the Warring States period, so I was feeling extremely bored. However, I neither had the interest to draw little comical illustrations in the margins of my neglected notebook, nor did I feel like circulating pleasant notes to my classmates. Besides, I didn't have any hobbies, which can be said to be as tedious as side jobs, or interests in general. While ignoring the wearisome explanation of the tactic of horizontal and vertical alliances[5], in order to pass the time I motionlessly reflected on the good fortune of having nothing to do while craving idleness.

Since Kamiyama High is a high school centered around preparing students for further studies, the pupils here largely have good attitudes towards learning. The old teacher's clear voice resounded in the classroom where tranquility is preserved. A stiff scraping sound rang out as the chalk hit the blackboard. It was currently the fifth period, so I'll probably get attacked by the sleep demon soon. It was a clear day in the June rainy season. And thus, my high school life is wasted. I knocked my mechanical pencil. It was not because I wanted to write something, but because the lead would not come out. I hadn't noticed that the lead was broken. I took out a spare pencil lead from my pencil case, holding it with my thumb and index finger. Instead of inserting it from the back, I tried inserting it from the front, as if I was threading a needle.

However, the peace was suddenly broken.

A dangerous sound rang out. It seemed like the sound of bamboo striking some hard object. Taken by surprise, I cringed. All sleepiness dissipated as the HB lead broke in the middle into two clean pieces. What a waste. Oh well, I guess I can still use them.

It seems that I was not the only one being startled, as commotion filled the classroom. Beside me, a female student said to her friend behind, "What

was that? It totally surprised me." It seems that no one would give up the opportunity to talk.

The sound did not occur only once. It rang out a few times in succession, mixed with some irate words. It was a loud, frightening male voice, but since it was in the classroom, I couldn't understand what it was saying. At that point, my classmates and I had deduced a large part of what was happening. In the classroom next door, the math teacher, Omichi, had lost his temper yet again.

The teaching profession is commonly referred to as picking up the teacher's cane, but in this era, I haven't seen a teacher hold a cane. At best, they had a flexible pointing stick. In the past, I had a teacher called Morishita in the student counseling department who embraced the belief "Even though you are not holding a fencing stick, there is no doubt that you want to hold it if it is allowed." Speaking of which, Omichi-sensei has a rough bamboo pole shaped like a fencing stick which he carries around and sometimes uses as a teacher's cane. However, Omichi-sensei, who can be said to be the most veteran teacher in the school, would definitely not use his pole to hit a student. He would only wield it on the teacher's desk and blackboard in order to coerce students to behave. Omichi-sensei is the honored teacher who has taught me that the blackboard is unexpectedly firm and difficult to damage.

Nevertheless, while I have this impression of Omichi-sensei, I neither dislike nor have disdain for him. I had this kind of teacher in middle school, and even in elementary school. If I had to say what I felt about him, it would be the same feeling I have for the girl that sits next to me. I know their faces, names and personalities, but I don't really care.

At any rate, I was not impressed by him causing a racket in my class. While I was thinking about that, a clear voice cut into the unstoppable, angry voice. That voice sure rings a bell. When I realized who the voice belonged to, I muttered at the same time without thinking,

"No way..."

That was Chitanda's voice.

I got to know her through a little fateful incident right after entering this school, and we have been in the same club ever since. Come to think of it, Chitanda was in the adjacent class. I was surprised that there was a student in this school who would argue with Omichi when he had just started hammering on the blackboard, and I never thought that the student would be Chitanda. I strained my ears to confirm that it was indeed Chitanda, but in any case it was a voice from across the wall. I can't say for sure, but the intonation also sounds like Chitanda.

I couldn't understand what she was saying, but her every word was without a doubt sharp and excited. I have heard her voice countless of times, but it's the first time I've heard that tone. It seems that Chitanda also gets angry and raises her voice.

She had probably said whatever she wanted to in one go, as the voice soon died down. Silence had also descended in our classroom for a short while, as if we were collectively holding our breath. On that note, stillness had returned to the classroom next door. Did Chitanda seriously cause Omichi to shut up? The irresponsible atmosphere which made us expect further trouble relaxed in an instant. In any case, since it was now quiet, we had no choice but to be brought back to our history lesson.

I took out another piece of lead for my mechanical pencil. This time, I refilled it quickly from the back, then spun it around my finger.

2.2

It was after school. The rays of the early summer sun shone diagonally into the Classics Club room, the Geography Lecture Room.

I held my paperback book open between my fingers, as I noticed Chitanda's flustered state. As to why she was being so nervous, it was because of the argument between Fukube Satoshi and Mayaka Ibara, who had taken up positions in the middle of the classroom, though it was not actually feasible for the two of them to quarrel. It was actually Ibara unilaterally criticizing Satoshi, and Satoshi avoiding it with some frivolous talk or taking it with a wry smile. Although I have been a witness to the squabble from the beginning, I have no idea what it is actually about. It probably started as a debate about something trivial like whether all telephone poles are tall or whether all postboxes are red.

It was April when Chitanda, Satoshi and I joined the Classics Club, which had no members. In May, Ibara approached Satoshi and asked to join the club.

Ibara has been in the same class as me since first grade, but we didn't really talk to each other. We finally went to different classes in high school, but now we're in the same club. Just how closely are we linked by fate? Then again, Ibara is currently engaged in three trades at the same time, as she's in the Library Committee, the Manga Research Society as well as the Classics Club. Satoshi, who is in the Executive Committee, Handicraft Society and Classics Club should go well with her.

The Classics Club was such a quiet, peaceful place when there was only three of us.

Satoshi talks with frightful passion, but if he has nothing he wants of others he would stay quiet. And Chitanda would be really calm, as one would expect, if her usual curiosity does not explode.

It's a peaceful place where we have our club activities and nothing happens. Little by little, I have been going to the Geography Lecture Room. It's not that I'm particularly interested in the activities, but I've come to think of it

as a relaxing place to be.

But the situation changed when Ibara joined the club. If Ibara is alone, she's just an unsociable classmate. However, when put together with Satoshi...

"You were the one who said you were going to do it in the first place maybe you have a reason but that's beside the point isn't it obvious that you should have just contacted me it would have been alright to cancel but you should have at least given me a call I know you had your phone with you it would be fine if it were just a hassle for me but it's not what's with that look can you listen properly do you understand the position you're in this won't be fixed just by saying sorry to me."[6]

It turns out like that.

How many times has it been? The first few times, Chitanda got terribly flustered and somehow tried to arbitrate. She tried to coax and cajole them, but unfortunately it was just wasted effort. Now she was not trying to interfere, but was waiting for the right time to ask about what was wrong. I looked up and met her troubled gaze. She quietly pointed at the two of them with her index finger.

The book I was reading was a SF novel, and although the opening was interesting, it got difficult to understand at the climax. I knew that something bad had happened, but I had no idea what exactly it was. It couldn't understand it even after reading it a second time, and that was when I gradually found the two voices to be noisy. I sighed and put my book face down.

"And I know you're aware of it but you don't have a shred of decency when it matters you know what was going to happen but you didn't say anything after that it rained it was windy there was lightning and even hail fell in the end I didn't really care about this meeting but I spent time picking what to wear and all of a sudden they're a wreck and it's all your fault you can't say anything about it right?"

Ibara shouted on and on with one breath.

"Are you tired yet?"

Ibara, who was staring daggers at Satoshi, turned to look at me, and gave a short and clear answer.

"I am."

"Then take a break."

"Fine."

She sat down meekly on a table nearby. She was really angry just now, so I'm not sure if her ire was dealt with so easily. Satoshi faced me an gave me an American-style thumbs-up as a sign of gratitude, and shamelessly said,

"Boy, you sure can get mad. I bet you released a lot of stress there."

"If Fuku-chan had more common decency, I wouldn't get stressed in the first place."

"Well, but..."

At the blatant falsehood, Satoshi turned to Chitanda.

"You should learn from Chitanda-san. I've never seen her get angry."

Chitanda was heaving a sigh of relief and stroking down her chest as she witnessed the truce. I've never seen her do that before. Upon suddenly being dragged into a conversation, she let out a startled reply.

"Eh? Me?"

But Ibara frowned.

"Really? But doesn't she get angry whenever Oreki is late?"

There was indeed something like that in the past, but that anger is slightly different from Ibara's ire. What's the appropriate word for it?

"I also saw it. But that was more of a scolding than anger."

That's it, I thought for an instant, when I realized that I was quite pitiable to be scolded by a girl of the same age.

"Ah, yeah, that's right. It did seem more like a remonstration."

That's also not good.

With a troubled smile and a vague expression, Chitanda tilted her head.

"If you're talking about not getting angry, I have not seen Fukube-san or Oreki-san get angry, either..."

After a brief moment, Ibara and I opened our mouths at the same time.

"Satoshi totally gets angry."

"Fuku-chan does get angry."

When people are attacked from two sides, their ability to judge falls considerably, and it was no different for Chitanda. Her large eyes tried to focus on both Ibara and I, failed, then settled on Satoshi, who was in between us.

"Is that so?"
Satoshi answered with a wry smile.

"Well, I guess. I don't display my anger as much as Mayaka, but I do get angry every now and then."

I just realized that I haven't seen Satoshi get angry in front of Chitanda yet. Well, it's only been two months. Anything's possible.

"I cannot imagine Fukube-san get angry, though."

It's understandable from Chitanda's perspective. Since Satoshi likes to show off his prowess in weird areas, he rarely displays his emotions without being afraid of what others might think, much less to the opposite gender, with Ibara being an exception.

"He's not at all scary when he's angry."

Yeah, his anger has hardly any intensity. He just speaks less, doesn't make

eye contact and distinctly changes the topic by saying "Let's not talk about this." From my experience, it's not actually that rare for Satoshi to do this.

"Not scary? You really look down on me..."

Looking at the grumbling Satoshi with upturned eyes, Chitanda muttered.

"I think I am curious."

It seems that Chitanda is planning to rile up Satoshi. I'm totally looking forward to that.

"What about Oreki?"

Ibara was looking at me.

Just when I was about to tell them about how I haven't been angry lately, or that I was enjoying myself in this situation which was as stable as a spring day, Ibara smiled. While a smile is a smile, that was unmistakably a sneer. Ibara then turned to look at Chitanda, and in a tone that seemed to say "Get ready for it," she spoke.

"Oreki would never get angry."

"Is that because he's too gentle?"

Ibara shook her head.

"No, it's just that he's a lonely human being who can't even gain satisfaction from getting angry."

... Hey, isn't that a little cruel, whatever the circumstances?

Ah, but I realize that I didn't even get angry from that. I haven't been angry lately, but when was the last time I lost my temper? Well, no need to be bothered about it. Ibara'a pithy sayings are always accurate... not. It does get one aspect of the truth, but I can't say that it is totally correct. There's also the explanation that I'm too gentle to get mad, after all. Wait, that not right either, I can get angry if I want to.

"Haha, Houtarou's unsure."

I was a little annoyed at Satoshi stating the situation so frankly. Hey, I got angry!

Not caring about me, Satoshi carried on with his joke.

"Houtarou's lack of emotions aside, I think Chitanda never getting angry is a special case. It's like she's used to having forbearance and being composed. Mayaka should try to be more calm and collected, not in Houtarou's style but like Chitanda-san."

"Even if you say that, it's not like I can change that part of me just by trying. I don't want to be like Oreki, and I can't be like Chii-chan."

Chitanda's eyebrows clouded over. In a voice which was difficult for me to hear, she asked.

"Erm... am I being praised here?"

I wonder, although I'm definitely being spoken ill of. I somehow met Satoshi's and Ibara's eyes.

First, Ibara spoke.

"I think you might be."

Next was me.

"We were just making observations, so we said nothing positive or negative."

But Satoshi smiled with extreme amusement.

"No, no, forget those people who are unable to get angry, but I believe it's an excellent trait to not get angry. Wrath is a serious sin, after all. I think you should scale back on your outbursts, Mayaka."

"Sin? Do you get fined for them? Like for loud noises?"

Satoshi shook his head in a self-important manner, while Chitanda gave an

explanation with a slightly red face.

"The deadly sins, right? I thought it was known as rage..."

But then she continued.

"If you are trying to praise me, please stop."

Chitanda was hanging her head in embarrassment. On top of that, her voice was even smaller than before, so no one accepted the protest. This is probably the first time I'm seeing Chitanda feeling shy. On the other hand, Satoshi nodded in satisfaction.

"That's right. As expeected of Chitanda-san. Since it's a popular topic, I believe Mayaka has heard of the seven deadly sins?"

"Yeah, of course I would know that."
I don't.

"Aren't there 108 sins?"

"That's klesha."[7]

Whatever.

"The seven deadly sins are concepts from Christ's teachings, but they were only put together in posterity, so they are not recorded in the Bible. Er, besides wrath, there's also..."

Satoshi said as he bent his thumb. Bending the rest of his fingers in order, he continued.

"Pride, greed, gluttony... Hmm, I can only remember these four..."

Satoshi, who was looking like an idiot staring at his fist, was saved by Chitanda.

"Envy, lust and sloth, I think."

When she said the last sin, it seemed like Ibara looked at me and laughed...

Well, it's not good to have a persecution complex. Currently, Ibara was looking at Chitanda.

"So that's the seven deadly sins. Doesn't that make Chii-chan perfect? You're diligent, and you don't overeat."

"I can't imagine you being greedy, and you're definitely not lazy."

"And, er... you're not dirty-minded."

"It's hard to tell if she's envious of anyone, though."

These two were now clearly mocking her rather than praising her. Chitanda's cherry-colored face became gradually redder. She wrung her hands to deny the allegations and spoke at a rapid pace.

"Please stop! Besides, when I get hungry I can eat a lot!"

So would anyone.

"She seems like Saint Eru, right?"

"Doesn't 'Chitanda Eru' sound kind of angelic?"

"Uriel, Gabriel, Chitandael? Ahaha!"

These two sure go well together. Chitanda was pressed for a response in the face of extraordinary coordination. She cleared her throat, and mustered her fortitude and dignity. Then, suddenly,

"I said, please stop it!"

She cried in a clear voice.

"She got angry..."

"And scolded us."

Chitanda smiled at the two despondent-looking people.

"Besides, I don't think that it's a good thing to never get angry."

Ibara and Satoshi looked shocked, and I probably also had a similar expression. Chitanda continued smoothly without showing even a hint that she was searching for words to say.

"Is it not thte same for the other deadly sins?"

"Sorry, Chii-chan, but I don't really understand."

"Is that so? I should have used a better choice of words, then."

Chitanda smiled while answering.

"I think that one cannot do without pride and greed. Although since they were based on religious teachings, there must have been various reasons as to why they were considered deadly sins."

Satoshi tilted his head at an unnatural angle.

"Any examples?"

"For example, if you have no pride, then that means that you have no self-confidence. And someone who can never be called greedy would be unable to support their family. Furthermore, if no one in the world felt envy, new technologies would not have been invented."

Chitanda stopped in surprise. Looking at our expressions, she spoke.

"Umm... I didn't mean to turn this into a lecture..."

Satoshi, who had been listening attentively, folded his arms.

"Hmm, I see. Interesting..."

I was pleased that my way of life was being defended. I asked with a light tone.

"Basically, you're saying that it's a matter of degree? That's like Confucianism."

"I cannot explain the Bible, but I just don't think it's useful to take the

deadly sins as absolute and apply that to our lives."

She asserted without shyness. I hadn't thought about what Chitanda believes in, so this is quite interesting.

"So do you think that getting angry is not a bad thing, Chii-chan?"

"That's right. If you can never get angry at anything, that probably means you have nothing that you like."

I can totally get angry.
"But if that's the case, then why don't you ever get angry?"

That was a quick response.

"Because it tires me out. And I do not want to be tired."

Oh?

Satoshi held his head, which had been drained of color, in his hands and rose to his feet.

"Chi-Chitanda-san's been poisoned by Houtarou! What in the world! I should have at least prevented this from happening! There's a ghost haunting Kamiyama High! The ghost of conserving energy!"

"No, that was just a joke."

Silence descended.

In a voice that seemed like it would vanish soon, she apologized.

"Sorry, I had a sudden impulse to play around."

I could say that it was obvious, but that's just escaping from the fact that I was just fooled by Chitanda. And I thought that I had found a soulmate.

Chitanda answered the question again, as if the tomfoolery earlier had been forgotten.

"It's not that I can't get angry. I can also lose my temper. Hmm, for example..."

Our attentive gazes were gestures prompting her to get on with her answer.

"When I see people wasting food, I get angry."

... Well, she's the daughter of a farming family. She believes in the saying "Each grain of rice is a drop of sweat."

Thinking about that, I suddenly remembered about the incident during the fifth period. I spoke without giving much thought.

"On that topic, wasn't it you who got angry in Omichi's class during the fifth period?"

While speaking, I felt Chitanda's mood change.

Now I've done it. A wave of regret caused my back to stiffen.

Chitanda, who had been enjoying the amusing a calm chat, slightly pulled back her slender chin and closed her lips tightly. While she doesn't exaggerate her emotions, her mood changes are easy to understand. She muttered.

"Ah, that's right! How could I have forgotten? I was hoping that I could ask Oreki-san about that!"

Great. Another blunder. Satoshi and Ibara were teasing Chitanda about being a saint or blessed person just now. I was thinking that the image didn't really suit her if you consider the aspect of doing things in moderation. That was a huge error. While she is diligent, the trait that makes her differ from a perfect person is her curiosity.

Having stirred up trouble for myself[8], I clicked my tongue silently. Indifferent to my plight, Satoshi seemed to be at ease.

"Did something happen, Chitanda-san?"

"Yes. Actually, during the fifth period, I got angry in math class."

Chitanda gave Satoshi and Ibara a vague nod, and then turned to look at me. I wish I had been looking elsewhere, but there's no use crying over spilt milk.

"But I do not know what happened to make me angry. Of course, there was no need for me to get angry, but something happened to make me angry, and I do not know what it was that happened."

I had to work really hard to grasp the meaning of her convoluted sentence. In short, it's probably what Chitanda said next.

"I'm curious!"

2.3

Today's fifth period was math, taught by Omichi-sensei.

I believe that Oreki-san and Fukube-san know what kind of teacher he is.

I'm not sure where I should start so that you will understand, so I will explain from the beginning.

Omichi-sensei arrived pretty much just as the bell chimed for the fifth period. He looked displeased, but as far as I know, he has that expression for most circumstances. He opened the door, and right before he entered the classroom, he stopped for a moment and looked at the class name plate. Everything up to that point was fairly normal.

After hurriedly bowing, he started writing a quadratic equation on the blackboard. It was quite a simple equation, $y = x^2 + x + 1$, but he restricted the domain of x from 0 to 3. Then, wile tapping his shoulder with his bamboo pole, he singled out Kawasaki-san and told him to draw the range of y. Do you know Kawasaki-san? He is a tall and thin guy who stammers a little... but that has nothing to do with the story.

Kawasaki-san obviously looked confused, as was I. We had not been taught anything about domain restrictions yet.

I thought that Omichi-sensei was testing our imagination, trying to find out what we knew about domain restrictions before starting his lesson. Frankly, I am no expert on these matters, but I have experienced this style of teaching before. Then again, this method of making students think does not seem to fit with Omichi-sensei's lesson plan.

Kawasaki-san thought about Omichi-sensei's question for a while, then said that he did not know how to answer it.

At that moment, contrary to my expectations, Omichi-sensei became angry. "What? You don't know? What were you listening to in my previous lesson?" He started berating Kawasaki-san... I don't really want to say this, but it was actually more like he was abusing Kawasaki-san.

After saying some more unreasonable words about how his future was

insecure, Omichi-sensei told Kawasaki-san to sit down.

The next one chosen was Tamura-san, who is better in math than Kawasaki-san. He stood up, but was unable to give an answer.

Omichi-sensei called Tamura-san an idiot and ordered him to sit down. He then looked around the class and said in a loud voice, "Isn't there anyone who can solve this?"

I should have probably noticed it earlier, but at this point I finally realized that Omichi-sensei had mistaken how far we had gotten in the textbook. I checked the textbook, and found that today we should have only completed the methods of determining a quadratic function and started on maximum and minimum values. Omichi-sensei was off by about one hour worth of lessons.

As others in the class began to realize too, the classroom started to get noisy. That only made Omichi-sensei more irritated and he started striking the blackboard with his bamboo pole. He then criticized our attitude towards lessons, love of learning and public spirit in an exasperated tone. He also had really harsh words to say about our path after graduation and our future. Yes, that's right, he would hit the blackboard after every pause.

I think there were a few people in the class who could sketch the range of y. I do not go to a prep school, but I know that most prep schools cover lesson content considerably earlier compared to normal schools. However, those who knew the answer just kept silent, and no one raised their hand.

Omichi-sensei pointed at Tamura-san again. He was made to stand up and remain there until he thought of the answer. That was when I stood up. I told him that he might have mistaken our progress, and requested him to double-check in the textbook.

Eh? What did I say specifically?

... Sorry, but that's a secret. Whatever I said while I was angry is not something I want to recall and be proud of.

That's right, that was when I got angry.

2.4

After saying all that, Chitanda cleared her throat slightly. She was probably embarassed from revealing her anger.

The expert on rage, Ibara, urged Chitanda to carry on.

"What happened after that?"

"Omichi-sensei picked up the textbook. Then he checked a few pages, muttered 'Ah, I see!' and told Tamura-san to sit down. It was a normal lesson after that."

Ibara folded her arms imperiously.

"So Omichi's that kind of teacher. I'm sorry for Chii-chan and everyone else, but I'm glad I didn't get that kind of teacher!"

"Exactly! Seriously, it's thanks to him that I had to work my ass off even after the midterm exams!"

I gave a reply to Satoshi, who had raised his voice, as if he was in a play.

"Your failing marks are not Omichi's fault. You'd better do something about your final exams."

Next, I said to Ibara,

"He's not exactly a bad teacher."

"That's right, he is not a terrible teacher."
"Well, I guess he's not so bad."

Aren't these amazing people who can understand any perspective?

Chitanda looked at me.

"So, anyway, what do you think?"

By that, do you mean that the story is over? I rearranged my crossed legs.

"Was there something strange about that story?"

Chitanda looked from right to left, troubling over whether she should repeat what she had just said. Then, she spoke.

"Ah, I did not mention what I was most concerned about.

"What I find mysterious is why Omichi-sensei made that kind of mistake. From his writing on the blackboard and his exam markings, Omichi-sensei does not seem the type to make mistakes."

"Well..."

Satoshi edged into the conversation.

"There are two types of strict teachers. One is strict to himself, while the other is lenient to himself."

Isn't that also true for people in general. Well, even I know that Omichi would be the former type.

"Even so, why did he make such an obvious mistake? I really don't understand."

As usual, you're asking the impossible. I raised my eyebrows.

"So you want to know why he committed the error? That's impossible no matter how you look at it. Why don't you go to the staff room now and look inside his head?"

Chitanda shook her head.

"No, please listen. Oreki-san and Fukube-san probably know this, but Omichi-sensei always opens his textbook after the lesson, even if he did not use it at all."

Satoshi and I looked at each other and shrugged at the same time. None of us had bothered to observe his actions.

"And then he uses his pen to write some short memo. What do you think

that is for?"

I see, so that's how it is. I get what she's trying to say.

"To keep track of how far in the curriculum he went in that class?"

"I think so too. Omichi-sensei would notice any mistakes by checking the textbook, and I believe that has happened a few times before. Furthermore, he most likely knows that we are class A, for he always checked the name plate before entering a classroom.

"Are you following? Omichi-sensei then looks at the memo that shows the lesson progress and then checks the classroom again. You could say that it is perfect.

"But then, why would he still be able to make a mistake?"

I'm guessing that his notes are like "1st June, Class X" on page 15 and "3rd June, Class X" on page 20 or something. If not, he wouldn't know which page he had gotten to.

I threw out a suggestion without giving much thought.

"Couldn't he have mistaken the date?"

One has to take responsibility for his words. The punishment for my careless words was dealt swiftly. With a cold gaze, Ibara retorted.

"... If that's the case, he might backtrack, but it couldn't have caused him to skip ahead. use your brain, don't just speak by spinal reflex."

Did you have to say the word "spinal"? Ibara is in perfect form today. Indeed, he could looks at a previous memo, but he definitely cannot do so for a future memo that has not been written...

Ibara, who was on top form, turned to Chitanda and cocked her head in puzzlement.

"I'm not trying to beat you at your own game, but..."

"Yes?"

"I'm a little curious about something. Mind if I ask you a question?"

"You're asking me? Yes, go ahead."

Chitanda changed her posture, which may have been a lack of judgment on her part. Instead of taking on a more serious disposition, Ibara asked the question in her usual tone.

"About Chii-chan's story, I understand why you would get angry. It seems like he said something extremely severe, and in that situation I would be angry, too. But I wouldn't want to talk back to a teacher like that. Isn't that like deliberately putting your hand into a fire?"

She said the last sentence while looking at me and Satoshi in order. Well, that's an extreme thing to say. Witticisms like that don't suit her.

Ibara may not know Omichi, but she knows that it's a huge risk to argue with him when he has lost his temper. I would obviously not do something like that, and neither would Satoshi. I doubt anyone in Kamiyama High's thousand-strong student body would do that. That's why I was surprised during the fifth period.

But Chitanda gave a careless response.

"I'm not sure why I got angry."

She got so mad she forgot herself? Is this Chitanda we're talking about here? No matter what, I just can't imagine... As I thought to myself, Chitanda continued.

"But I don't think I got angry because he was criticizing us."

After pondering for a while, Ibara asked,

"Then was it because those who could answer kept quiet?"

"No. NO one would want to answer in that situation. Also, if someone had

answered, the lesson would have continued while it was too far ahead."

"Because no one else pointed out the teacher's mistake?"

"No."

Ibara thought some more.

"Was it because that Tamura person looked pitiful?"

That would be just like Chitanda.

Or too much like her. The person in question tilted her head to the side.

"I was sympathetic towards him, but I don't think I would get angry over that. I don't really understand myself, but I can understand why Omichi-sensei would scold students who did not remember anything from the previous lesson, although his words might have been too harsh.

"... But what was it that made me angry?"

Then Chitanda gave a half-smile.

"I find myself difficult to understand sometimes."

"Hmm, I see."

Ibara also smiled awkwardly.
I understand why Ibara asked her question. Anyone in Chitanda's shoes would feel pissed off. Even I would have felt uncomfortable in that position. But since we have the impression that Chitanda never loses her temper, it is strange for her to be angry even when that would be natural for others.

But the answer for that question was not given. As Chitanda mentioned, it could be because she finds it difficult to answer, or perhaps because she feels embarrassed about it, or maybe because it's troublesome... Wait, did she even mention anything about it being troublesome?

I don't know Chitanda well enough to sense her likes and dislikes.

Moreover, I had more interest in finishing the paperback book in my hand.

"What do you think, Oreki-san?"

"No clue."

"I also don't know why, but..."

At that point, Chitanda paused. She quickly took a deep breath and looked at me, her huge eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"But you can figure it out if you just think about it a little!"

"Oh?" Satoshi said in a raised voice. I was taken aback. Is this what it feels like to be depended on?

And did she realize that I had not put in any thought about it?

Ibara, who was sitting on the other side of the classroom, raised her eyebrows.

"Chii-chan, you can't expect much from Oreki, even if he tries. He was a grasshopper in his previous life."

”Eh, Mayaka-san, you can see people's former incarnations?"

Just when I thought that her curiosity had been diverted,

"But right now I'm curious about Omichi-sensei."

In an instant, we're back to square one. How annoying. By the way, Satoshi's more suited to being a grasshopper than me. They die in the winter not because they save energy, but because of their principle of enjoying life to its fullest.

"Oreki-san."

Well, I won't get anywhere if I don't say anything...

I guess I'll give up on my book for a while and start thinking.

2.5

It should be safe to assume that Omichi was indeed writing down the class' progress in his textbook. At any rate, he's done nothing but teach math for the last ten or twenty years. Like for previous years, he's teaching many classes this year, and it would be definitely confusing to keep track of each class' progress. Using memos would be the obvious answer.

However, despite his efforts, he made a mistake. And he did not backtrack, but went further ahead. This is truly a strange story.

Wait a minute. How would it be possible to skip ahead?

To commit that mistake, there has to be a note on one of the pages after the correct one. Class X has not advanced that far yet, but a note on the page indicates that they have.

That could just be the simple answer to the problem. I crossed my legs and asked Chitanda,

"Your class hasn't learnt about domains, right?"

"Yes, you're right."

Chitanda looked bewildered as she affirmed the needless statement. My next question only added to her confusion.

"What if I said that your class already has?"

"... What do you mean?"

"Omichi teaches math every year. We're not Omichi's only students... last year's class A also learnt about restrictions on the domain of X at some point."

"Ah," Chitanda gasped. Mistaking last year's memo for this year's is certainly plausible, right?

However, before Chitanda could declare her agreement, Satoshi shook his

head slowly.

"If you're saying that he might have mistaken last's years notes, I'm afraid that's impossible."

"What do you mean?"

As always, Satoshi seemed awfully happy when sharing some meaningless information.

"It's simple. The teachers get new textbooks every year. They need to have the latest revisions to stay consistent with the students, right? By the way, Omichi is using this year's fourth edition."

Chitanda cast down her eyes.

... I see, it does seem obvious after Satoshi said it. I would really like to know how he even knows which edition Omichi is using, though.

But since Omichi has the habit of writing in his textbooks, what if the notes got mixed up... it's certainly possible, but whether Chitanda would accept it is another question. Omichi probably writes the class and date on the page where he stopped. Could he have written it in some confusing scrawl? Unless there's a way to prove that he likes to scribble in his textbook... Hmm.

Seeing me sit there in sullen silence, Satoshi decided that I was not to be depended on and continued in a light-hearted tone.

"I really don't get domains, though. I'm not proud of it, but it's already hard enough for me just to draw the x and y axes. It would be scary to be singled out by Omichi."

If that's the case, how about you forget some of your random trivia and focus on your studies instead? ... I can't really say that, can I? It would be like telling birds not to fly. I wonder what Satoshi is trying to learn about now. I remember him saying something about The Book of Changes.[9]

Ah, hang on.

I suddenly hit upon an idea. I questioned Satoshi.

"Satoshi, is your class already done with domains?"

"Hm? Yeah."

"What class are you in?"

"Hey Oreki, you should at least remember your friends' classes."

I tried a counterattack on Ibara.

"Then do you know what class I'm in?"

"It's not like we're friends or anything."

I was lost for words.

Seeing the situation, Satoshi laughed.

"It's okay, Mayaka. Houtarou knows."

As he said that, I had a feeling that I did know.
Satoshi's class has completed domains. My class has not. And of course, neither has Chitanda's.

I see. I get it now.

"There is not question that he made a note on some page ahead of where your class has gotten to."

I asserted.

"Yes, that's right. I think so too."

"Additionally, the note was written this year, and shows the class' progress. What if the memo he wrote wasn't, in fact, for your class, but for Satoshi's class?"

"Fukube-san's class?"

Ignoring Chitanda's question, Satoshi asked dubiously.

"Omichi is in charge of classes A, B, C and D. Even if it wasn't class A or B, it doesn't have to be class D, right?"

Ibara interjected.

"And anyway, why class D?"

"Because it wouldn't be strange for him to mistake D for A. C is clearly nothing like A."

Ibara glared at me, as if to say "You've said something stupid again." No, that's inaccurate. She actually said it.

"You've said something stupid again. A and D are totally different."

I slightly quailed under her stare, but I pretended to remain calm.

"Omichi's a math teacher."

"So?"

"A math teacher has a much higher chance of mixing up A and D. It's like the katakana ツ(tsu) and シ(shi)."

"What?"

Her disdainful glare seemed to ask, "Hey, are you not feeling well?" Somehow, when she's arguing with Satoshi, she can remain enlivened all the way until the end, but when arguing with me, she seems to lose her energy.

Even so, I continued.

"For example, Omichi wrote something like '1st June, A' on page 10 and '1st June, D' on page 15, right? If he mistook D for A, that would explain what happened. Furthermore..."

I took a short breath.

"Omichi would be used to writing in the lower case."

At that instant, all four of us fell into silence.

I was wondering if they had understood, or if they were thinking, "What rubbish is this?" It was a tense moment for me.

Finally the silence was broken.

"Ah, I see!"

Satoshi exclaimed.

"It's the lower case a and d!"

I nodded with a stiff expression. Since Chitanda claimed that Omichi checked the class name plate, it would be wrong to say that he had gotten the classroom wrong. In that case, there would be no other way for him to be mistaken except through the memo. It would be impossible for him to read A wrongly. However, it would be a different story for a.

Ibara still firmly remained silent.

Her lips stiffened, and for some reason she stared at me resentfully. But unexpectedly, what came out of her mouth was words of agreement.

"... Yeah, that's possible."

"What, are you feeling uncomfortable?"

"Yeah, I recently lost points in an English test because the teacher couldn't tell the difference between my a and d."

"Oh, you too? In my case, it was n and h."

Thankfully, it seems that I'm not the only one with this experience. In my case it's not English but Math, and I've lost marks because my 1 and 7 could

not be differentiated. Thinking about it, that was when I was still a rosy-cheeked, handsome youth, that is to say, when I was in first grade. I remember feeling vexed about getting the right answer and not getting the marks, but I didn't care too much about it.

Now, what about Chitanda?

Chitanda, with her elegant handwriting, has not had such an experience. She thought for a while, then gave two slight nods.

"Yes, that does seem likely."

Chitanda smiled gently.

"a and d... I can understand the mistake now. I may have gone too far in what I said to Omichi-sensei. That was wrong of me."

Those words made me feel slightly shocked.
Those were almost the exact words that I predicted that Chitanda would be thinking.

"Eh? Why do you say that?"

After taking a sidelong glance at Ibara, who was insisting that Chitanda did not go too far since Omichi was in the wrong, I stole a glance at Chitanda's face. Contrary to her self-blaming words, her countenance was sunny and I could even see that she was somewhat relieved.

This is what I thought deep down.

The normally calm Chitanda got angry, and she wanted to know why. She said that it's not necessarily bad to get angry, but the truth is that she never wants to. Perhaps Chitanda wanted Omichi to have had his reasons, and wanted to believe that she got angry because of her own mistake, so she wanted to understand her reasons for getting angry.

Isn't Chitanda that kind of person?

No.

I shook my head to chase that last thought away. What's with me thinking "Isn't Chitanda that kind of person?" when I've known her for only two months? I would largely understand Satoshi's thoughts and feelings, since I've known him since middle school. The same can be said of Ibara, who has been in the same class as me for nine years and can be said to be an acquaintance. But what do I know about Chitanda?

That's right. I've managed to predict her actions sometimes, but then again, her motives were clearly shown, and to think that I can read her innermost thoughts would be, as she said, to commit a deadly sin. The deadly sin of pride. I'd better watch out, I've somehow become quite conceited. Even just today, how many times has Chitanda acted different from my expectations?

I smiled bitterly, and realized that Ibara and Satoshi had digressed from the topic of Omichi. Seems like it's not my turn anymore. I looked at my watch and found that it was almost five. I gazed at the sunset outside. Perhaps it's time to go home?

"I understand what Chii-chan is saying, but I don't know, if I was there..."

"Then you would do what you would normally do. But think about what Chitanda-san was saying earlier..."

Well, I guess it's still early. I picked up my book and read the page it was open at again. Like this, more of my high school life is squandered away. Personally, I think that committing the deadly sin of sloth is more than enough for me.

3 - The Ghost, When Examined

3.1

I've often heard the saying, "All ghosts, when examined, are just withered flowers." However, in this modern era, people are unable to grasp the idea of romanticism even after looking it up in a dictionary, withered flowers are rarely treated as ghosts, and apparitions in this world are revealed in succession to be nothing more than withered flowers. It would probably be difficult for us to notice a real specter if it kept its true form.

I was saying that on a bus that was traversing a mountain path in August, when the lingering summer heat was still severe. Fukube Satoshi, who was sitting next to me, nodded in deep thought.

"Interesting. A metaphysical repudiation of the merit of the idea, in the form of a witticism. It really suits you, Houtarou."

Ibara, who was sitting in front, turned around even though she wasn't called. She raised her eyebrows.

"I don't like that way of thinking. I guess I'm not the type to only use my head for everything."

I listened to their responses, took a short while to digest them, and quickly shouted a denial.

"Hey, I said nothing of the sort!"

I was actually intending to bring up some urban legend similar to UFOs and Nessie, or in other words, an extremely common topic of discussion. Specifically, I wanted to talk about the story on TV yesterday, "Reporters on the scene! The truth behind Hamana Lake's giant eel, Hussie[10]!" My phrasing might have been rather indirect, but I didn't think that my words would be misinterpreted so willfully. Just as I was about to explain myself, Chitanda, who was wearing a dress and sitting next to Ibara, turned around and smiled.

"I'm also curious about the true nature of the withered flowers."

It seems that everyone misunderstood. I didn't really want to force everyone to understand what I was saying, so I shut my mouth.

There are four members in Kamiyama High's Classics Club.

And why were all members of the Classics Club on the bus that was making its bumpy journey on the mountainous road? The answer to that, of course, lies in the bus' destination. The final stop, Zaizen Village, is a village in a ravine famous for mountain hiking and hot springs. I would never go hiking, so by process of elimination, we were heading there for the hot springs.

The groan of the bus' engine became louder as the path grew steeper.

3.2

It was summer break in August, and actually taking a break during a holiday fits with my personal beliefs. However, thanks to the Classics Club President, Chitanda,I had to go to the hot springs.

During this summer break, all of us in the Classics Club worked together to solve what Satoshi calls "The Hyouka Incident", which was really important for Chitanda. After solving the mystery, she thanked us, and to reward our efforts, she planned a trip to the hot springs. By default, I just wanted to stay at home, so I definitely would not agree with the plan, but somehow my resistance was broken and it was decided that I would participate.

Zaizen Village was one and a half hours from Kamiyama City by bus. We did not have to pay for our accommodations, as Ibara's relatives were running an inn, and since they were currently renovating and were accepting no customers, they were letting us stay for free.

I'm not especially weak in taking transport, but perhaps because the mountain road was too steep, I got car-sick right before we arrived. After that, we were picked up at the bus stop in a van by Ibara's relatives and we finally reached Seizansou. I sat down by the window of my allocated room and enjoyed the amazing scenery, which dissipated my discomfort.

The room was twenty tatami mats in size, which was really large for just me and Satoshi. I opened the large window, and was surprised that we were so close to the mountain, which was covered in a deep foliage. There was white fog rising up here and there, probably steam from the hot spring. Along the winding prefectural road, there were a few inns and private houses. I could see a school a little further away. Since there were few students, the elementary school was combined with the middle school. I'm definitely not a person of plentiful sensitivities, but I'm not so solid as to not feel anything while traveling.

"This room has a pretty good view, huh?"

Satoshi's voice came from behind. I replied without turning around,

"I guess this kind of thing isn't bad every now and then. I might be asking too much, but it would be more dignified to come here alone."

Satoshi sniggered.

"Houtarou, traveling alone? Stop joking around, you're definitely not the type of person to voluntarily do something elegant like going to the hot springs. Don't forget that you're here because Chitanda planned this trip and Mayaka used her connections."

As Satoshi intended, I was sullen with silence. The one with the most poisonous tongue in the Classics Club was Ibara, but Satoshi's eloquent speeches could be quite insulting, too. What made it worse was that he was right. There was no doubt that I wouldn't even think of going to Zaizen Village on my own.

That's why I should be thankful to Chitanda for causing me to actually go to Zaizen Village and enjoy the beautiful scenery.

I heard footsteps in the corridor, and soon after, there were a few rough knocks on the door.

"Dinner!"

That was Ibara's voice.

Next came Chitanda's voice, which sounded like she was imitating Ibara.

"It's time for dinner!"

"Hear that? Let's go!"

As prompted, I left the area near the window. While it's certainly not a bad thing to be at the hot springs, I somehow felt ill at ease knowing that those guys would be near me all the time. There was the smell of cheese wafting down the corridor. Dinner would probably be stew or gratin, with the dark horse being cheese fondue. Yeah, I guess that would be it. I took a deep breath.

Seizansou consists of two buildings: the annex, which we were currently using, and the main building, which was undergoing renovation.

Both buildings were almost equal in size. They were connected by a passageway, and if you look at the inn from a bird's eye view, it would look like the character ㄱ (ko). Each building had two floors and was made of wood; the floorboards in the corridors creaked when stepped on. There was only one staircase in the whole inn. Chitanda and Ibara's room was at the very end of the second floor, while Satoshi and I were one room away. Those large rooms could fit all four of us, or even double that, and have extra space remaining, but that's that.

The stairs were quite steep, so I had to concentrate when going down.

There was supposed to be a dining hall in the first floor of the main building, but it was being renovated, so we were to have dinner in a Japanese-style room on the first floor of the annex. I opened the sliding screen which had Mount Fuji painted on it, and saw that Chitanda, Ibara, as well as the two sisters had already taken their seats.

Chitanda and Ibara were sitting opposite the sisters, and the seats at the head and front of the table were empty. They had not started eating yet; it seems that they were waiting for us, as etiquette dictated. I sat on the floor cushion nearest to me, so Satoshi had the seat of honor. No one was taking any notice of the seating order in this setting, though.

The table was actually quite cramped with all six of us sitting around it. On the table, contrary to my expectations, there was a salad of fresh vegetables, fried shishamo[11], cold cuts of pork, and a miso soup with tofu and radish. Rice had already been scooped into wooden rice bowls. There was definitely the fragrance of cheese. What could it be from? I scanned the room and murmured,

"Is a cheesecake being baked?"

"Ah, how did you know?"

A girl with centered hair grinned. The cushion she was sitting on was low, but she was short in stature. With her frameless spectacles, large eyes, and her jubilant smile, she somehow gave off the impression of an excitable person. She wore a thin T-shirt and knee-length denim shorts. When put

together with Ibara, they would totally look like siblings, but then again they are related by blood. Furthermore, Ibara was also wearing a shirt and denim pants.

Speaking of which, Ibara's appearance hasn't changed a bit since elementary school. She would look like a younger sister when put together with anyone, but I can't say that to her face.

That recklessly sociable girl was one of the sisters of Seizansou, Zenna Rie.

"Amazing! It's just like what Maya-neechan said!"

What did you tell them, Ibara!

Next to Rie, there was a ponytailed girl sitting well-manneredly. To put it more accurately, she was shy. It seemed that she hadn't gotten used to us yet. I unnecessarily wondered if she could get on with being in a family that was running an inn.

Even without considering her shyness towards strangers and her frail appearance that I could not imagine a smile on, she was not like her older sister. I had seen both of them standing up earlier, and noticed that they had around the same height. Although her long sleeves were thin, she looked warm wearing them in the middle of summer. She would be graduating to middle school next year, but her stature was similar to that of Rie, who would be in the second year of middle school next year. She must have grown really fast for her age. Her name was Zenna Kayo.

"Let's eat!"

Ibara, who was acting more like a host than a guest, said. Everyone then separated their chopsticks successively and started on their meal. Chitanda clasped her hands tightly in prayer, which was normal. The sisters' parents weren't in the room; they were probably eating in the main building, for this room definitely couldn't fit another two people.

First was the miso soup, which I slurped continuously for a really long time. It was delicious, as expected for a business. Next, I tried the shishamo. It probably wasn't actually shishamo, but I still liked it since it had a nice

popping texture.

Rie was really interested about Ibara's high school life and was asking her about it. On the other hand, Kayo was hesitatingly asking Chitanda about her name. Satoshi would occasionally interrupt a conversation with a smile on his face, while I would just move my chopsticks in silence, pleased with the shishamo which I hadn't tasted in a long time.

"...And then it was like this..."

Rie, being immersed in the conversation, started drawing in the air with her chopsticks. That was improper dining etiquette, but I shouldn't worry about the home discipline of another family.

Rie reached out for the bamboo ladle in the salad bowl while Kayo was moving her chopsticks towards the pork. Since they moved at about the same time, Rie's arm struck Kayo's hand. Kayo's chopsticks, which was holding a slice of pork, jolted a bowl of miso soup. Having witnessed that scene from beginning to end, I wanted to warn them, but it was too late.

Some soup spilled from the bowl. Kayo squeaked.

"Ah!"

"Aah, what are you doing!"

Rie scolded while frowning. From my point of view, they were both at fault, but...

"So-sorry, Onee-chan!"

Kayo apologized, and reached for the tablecloth. Since it was a little far away, Chitanda passed it to her.

"Here you go."

"Th-thank you very much."

Rie told Kayo to be more careful next time. After Kayo had wiped up the spilled miso soup, I extended my chopsticks to get more shishamo. I

actually wanted to taste some mountain vegetables, but I suppose that would be asking too much.

3.3

After enjoying Rie's handmade baked cheesecake for dessert, we all went about with our separate activities. I went back to my room, but Satoshi, who should have gotten back already, wasn't there. Has he already gone to the bath house?

Being alone in the room, I retrieved a manga from the shoulder bag I usually use. Satoshi said that it was really outstanding for a manga about the Warring States period[12], so I borrowed it from him. Indeed, it was quite a realistic portrayal with a good range of human emotion, and the artwork went into the minutest details, so it was readable. Satoshi sure has interesting taste.

The story was set in the climax of Oda Nobunaga's[13] attack on the Asakura Clan. Nobunaga was about to secure the victory when he received a gift from his little sister. It was a pouch tied at both ends, with adzuki beans inside. On seeing this, Nobunaga declared, "This signifies that we're trapped like rats! Azai[14] has betrayed us!" It was the episode where Nobunaga's sister, who had married into the Azai family, covertly informed her brother about his predicament.

It made me wonder how Nobunaga realized that he was betrayed with only one pouch, but I thought that it was fundamentally a good story. Would my sister help me without a moment's delay if I'm in such a pinch? That would be a sight worth seeing.

After reading for about half an hour, my eyes got tired, so I stopped for a while. The lighting in the room was quite dim, which would be normal for a hotel, but not for an inn.

What should I do if not read manga? There was a TV in the room, but it would be even more painful for my eyes.

As a result, I had a lot of time to kill. If I don't feel like doing anything, I would usually lie down and sleep, but since we were at a hot-spring lodge, I thought that I might as well go down to the hot spring. I carried a towel which was provided in the room and went out to the hallway. That was exactly when I ran into Chitanda.

"Ah, where are you headed to?"

Chitanda also had a towel with her.

"Same place as you."

"It seems that there isn't a mixed bath here."

"No one said anything about that."

We walked together, and the flat sounds of our slippers alternated with the creaking of the floorboards. After thinking for a while, Chitanda asked,

"This may seem a bit random, but what kind of person is your sister?"

What? That's seriously random.

I recalled that Chitanda was an only child. I took a little time to choose the words for my answer.

"My sister, huh? By some definitions she would be an oddball, and by others she would be a genius. I doubt that I could be better than her at anything."

"Ah."

"Though I've never really cared to be... Why ask about my sister all of a sudden? Is it because of the Zenna sisters?"

Chitanda nodded slightly. She smiled shyly and answered in a small voice.

"The truth is, I've always wanted a sibling. An older sister or a younger brother. Don't you think it's wonderful to have someone you can go to for anything to be always by your side?"

I was slightly amazed by those words, and I shrugged instead of giving an answer. It seems that this young lady has the tendency to think too highly of others. And doesn't she also believe in ghosts?

The annex does have a bath house where one can be immersed in a hot

spring, but apparently it was as narrow as a normal bathroom. According to the others, there was an open air bath house nearby, so we headed there. I may believe in conserving energy, but I'm not so unrefined as to decline two or three minutes of walking and give up on a larger bath house.

After exiting Seizansou, we descended down the slope. It seems that the open air bath house, which could be seen after going round the bend, was managed by the inns and hotels in the area. There was a middle-aged woman collecting money at a bamboo counter, but she let us pass when we told her that we were guests of Seizansou.

Chitanda and I went our separate ways. There would have been a serious problem if we hadn't.

The changing room was unexpectedly small. I didn't see any other people there, but it seems that there was already someone inside, for there was a set of clothes in a basket at my feet. On closer inspection, I recognized the cargo pants in the basket. The person inside was most likely Satoshi.

I entered the bath house after taking off my clothes. The bathing area was made entirely of artificial rock so that it would look like a natural hot spring, and it was larger than I expected it to be. The water was white and cloudy, giving off the appearance of an actual hot spring, rather than normal hot water. The area was surrounded by a tall bamboo fence, so I couldn't get a good view of Zaizen Village. Well, I guess it would be troubling if people could peek inside with a lower fence. I scooped some water using a bucket, poured it on myself, and quickly stepped into the bath.

The water temperature was just right. I made my way to the interior of the spacious pool and found that there was a large rock in the middle. I touched it, and it felt real.

I could see someone on the other side of the steam. It's probably Satoshi. I raised a hand, and the figure languidly waved back. The person used breaststroke to swim, pushing his way through the water to get to me. During that time, I was leaning on the rock, and my whole body from the chin down was immersed in the water.

"Houtarou! You've come! This bath is great! It's practically flowing through

my body!"

"Getting your blood diluted with water is dangerous."

"It's something to do with osmotic pressure, right? How boring. Well, I guess it shows that you're relaxing."

With that, I kept quiet, while Satoshi also silently enjoyed the hot bath. I could hear the sound of someone getting into the water. That would probably be Chitanda.

It was evening. The soft rays of the sun slowly faded, as dusk noticeably fell over us. The stars started shining, and the warmth of the water gradually permeated my body, in proportion to the passage of time. I felt sleepy, probably because of that uncomfortable bus ride.

Before I knew it, Satoshi had left the bath to wash his body, while I was still drifting in the hot water.

My vision's going dark...

Mm.

I can't move?

3.4

I really have to thank Satoshi for bringing me back to the room safely. If I had been alone, it would have been a case for the hospital, or even a matter of life and death. At the sight of me returning to Seizansou while being supported by Satoshi's shoulder, Ibara shouted sharply.

"What happened, Oreki!"

I was in no state to reply. Satoshi answered in my place.

"He got dizzy from the hot water."

"....."

"It's kind of pathetic, really. He hadn't even been there half as long as me, but when I turned around, he'd almost passed out."

Ibara massaged her eyebrows.

"Oreki, you really.."

Thanks for worrying about me. I was carried into the room, while Ibara quickly laid out a futon and opened the window. I lay spread-eagled on the futon and breathed deeply.

"..Sorry about this, both of you."

"Don't mention it."

"You're just so pitiful...it's like you're fated to never enjoy an event."

With that, the two of them left the room. As Ibara unnecessarily stated, I was seriously pathetic. I might not be what you would call a tenacious person, but I at least had some confidence in my physical capabilities. I was probably still sick from that bus ride.

As I lay sprawled on the futon with my eyes closed, someone came into the room. From the scent of the shampoo, I could immediately tell that it was

Chitanda. She knelt down by the side of my futon and quietly spoke.

"Oreki-san...are you alright?"

"Not really."

"Should I bring a towel?"

A cold towel would certainly help me feel better, but I didn't feel like asking for Chitanda's assistance.

"No, it's okay. Sorry for throwing cold water on your carefully planned trip."

"It's fine. Anyway, we're going to tell ghost stories in a while. Would you like to join us?"

I smiled weakly. Isn't that a really old-fashioned way of spending summer nights? I was somewhat interested, but it was impossible for me to participate in this state.

I opened my eyes to find Chitanda's face to be much closer than expected. This young lady's sense of personal space is lower than the average person's. This is not the first or second time I've been startled by her. All I could see was her cherry-colored cheeks and her sparkling, wet hair. I instinctively looked away.

"Ah, I'll just go to sleep."

"I guess it can't be helped. Hope you get better soon."

The door closed, leaving only the smell of shampoo.

I checked my watch, and found that it wasn't even eight.

I could hear some strange sounds coming in from the window. I thought for a while, and concluded that they were probably the croaking of frogs. There was also a taiko[15] beating out a rhythm somewhere. Moreover, because we were on high ground, I could hear the chirping of insects, even though it

wasn't August yet.

And then...

After a short while, Rie's suppressed voice reached my ears. It seems that the window next door is also open. I wasn't paying much attention, but I could catch her words distinctly...

"You know that the inn is separated into the main building and the annex, right? Actually, we don't need the annex. There is a secret as to why it was built.

"A long time ago, when my grandma was managing the inn, a gloomy customer came to stay. He was put in room seven in the main building. However, he told them, 'I don't need meals or room service. Just stay away.' But he'd already paid in advance, and it was the busy season, so his conditions were accepted.

"Then, that night, a piercing scream echoed throughout the inn. Grandma was shocked and ran outside. The guests who were taking a stroll pointed at room seven and said that there was an indistinct shadow of a hanged man swaying in the breeze... It turned out that the customer had embezzled money from his company and run away.

"Ever since that incident, guests staying in room seven have been saying the same things. They say that there's something in the room and that they see shadows at night. And the ninth guest to stay in that room suddenly succumbed to an unknown illness in the middle of the night!

"That's why Grandma asked for an exorcism. However, she felt that alone wasn't enough, so she had the annex built to stop bad rumors from spreading. You can see room seven right across from this window. It's the room furthest in on the second floor. We live on the first floor, and we're told to stay away from the second floor...

"This story is strictly confidential! Don't talk about this in front of other customers, okay?"

I sniggered into my futon. That was seriously old-fashioned.

I wanted to sleep peacefully, so I somehow managed to move my uncontrollable limbs and crept out of my futon to close the window. I could tolerate the heat.

I thought I saw a shadowy figure in the courtyard while I was grappling with the window. However, I didn't manage to confirm the existence of that figure, for I immediately slipped into the futon and slept soundly until morning.

3.5

I slowly opened my eyes. It was already eight, according to my watch. Wow, I've slept for about twelve hours. My head still hurts a little, but I don't think it's because I'm still dizzy from the bath, but because I've simply slept too much.

I suddenly noticed that Satoshi was sleeping right next to me. I was careful not to wake him up as I took care of my personal appearance. I went down to the first floor while steadily tapping the side of my head, which was still feeling a little fuzzy.

Rie and Kayo were already in the living room, but breakfast was not on the table yet. I was about to ask about Chitanda and Ibara's whereabouts when both of them entered the room.

Ibara was acting strangely. She was clinging onto the sleeve of Chitanda's dress. She then looked at us and said,

"It, it appeared..."

I observed that scene coolly. Just what appeared?

Ibara drew closer to Rie with a jerk and said in one breath,

"A warm breeze in the middle of the night woke me up. When I turned over, in the room across from ours, I saw the shadow of a hanged man vaguely swaying back and forth, like this!"

Haha, this is thoroughly old-fashioned... It's pretty rare to see Ibara panicking like this, though. Too bad you're not here to see this, Satoshi.

Kayo brought us some hot tea. I was about to take a cup when I noticed that it had Rie's name on it, so I chose another one. I thought that Kayo would have also written her name on her cup, but I didn't find such a cup.

Rie smiled and said,

"I didn't know you were scared of stories like that, Maya-neechan!"

"It's not that I'm scared of ghosts, and I don't have a reason to detest them. But when you see something like that, it's just so disturbing!"

Kayo, who was holding a teapot, stiffened.

"Maya-neechan, you saw it?"

"I saw it. I definitely saw it. I really saw it!"

"Onee-chan! You told them the story? Dad said not to tell anyone!"

"Oh, shut up. It's fine, isn't it? It's only Maya-neechan."

As Ibara and the Zenna sisters were talking excitedly about the ghost story, I turned to look at Chitanda, who was kneeling a little further away, and our eyes met.

Chitanda wore a troubled expression and looked like she was brooding over something. Based on past experience, she probably wanted to say something. I spoke softly,

"What's the matter?"

She responded.

"Er... What do you think of Mayaka-san's story?"

"The hanged shadow, huh?"

I smiled.

"Well, these kind of standard, or you might say clichéd, stories live on because they're an indispensable part of life. Just like that time..."

"That time?"

"Ah, never mind."

I swallowed my words at the last moment. I almost said "Just like that time when Satoshi told his story about the Seven Mysteries[16]." That was also

definitely classic, clichéd and old-fashioned. And of course, it also made use of the power of suggestion. However, I do not wish to dig up that story. Especially not in front of Chitanda.

Since I had unexpectedly stopped committing myself to my own words, Chitanda peered at my face curiously. This is bad, I thought, but thankfully, Chitanda's interest was totally preoccupied with the hanged shadow.

"... So, do you think what Mayaka-san said is true?"

"Nope."

As I said that, Chitanda looked increasingly troubled and tilted her head in doubt.
"Then perhaps I'm mistaken as well."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

For some reason she lowered her voice and whispered into my ear.

"I saw it too. The hanged shadow that Mayaka-san mentioned."

It was at an unknown time. When Ibara woke up, Chitanda did too. She opened her eyes heavily, and she saw the shadow of a hanged man swaying in the dark.

"However, when I woke up, I was still feeling a little dazed. That's why I thought I was mistaken, but if Mayaka-san said she saw the same thing..."

"Oh."

If it was only Ibara or Chitanda who saw it, then I could conclude that it was just a daydream. However, since both of them saw the same thing at the same time, I would not be able to deny the existence of the hanged shadow. I changed my mistaken theory and said,

"You probably just mistook something else for it. Like Satoshi was saying yesterday, 'The ghost, when examined...'"

"...was just withered flowers?"

But Chitanda was not satisfied with that answer. Her gaze wandered to the ceiling, and then she looked me straight in the eye. Her eyes were filled with energy, showing that she had strong curiosity towards this mystery.

"If so, what exactly did I see?"

Before I knew it, Ibara was right behind us.

"That's right. If you say that we mistook something else for it, then tell us what it was we saw. Isn't it cowardly to deny what Chii-chan and I saw just because you didn't see it?"

...Why did you have to call me a coward?

Chitanda and Ibara were staring at me fixedly. Based on past experience, now that it has turned out like this, it's all too late to do anything.

"Of course, I will not ask Oreki-san to handle everything. Let's investigate together!"

Chitanda forcefully declared without dropping her stare.

I did not reply, because I don't like attempting the impossible, but I would at least have the privilege of acknowledging my situation with a sigh, right? As if dealing the final blow, Chitanda exclaimed,

"I'm curious!"

After a simple breakfast of bacon and eggs, instant soup and vegetable consomme, we returned to the second floor. We passed Satoshi, who was going down the stairs. He didn't know of the incident last night, but that's no

problem. He has a kaleidoscope of irrelevant knowledge, but I don't think it would be useful for this case.

Ibara had promised to help Rie with her summer homework.

"Sorry for not being able to help. Good luck, I guess."

"Leave it to us! We'll discover the truth behind the mystery! Right, Oreki-san?"

Well, I can't really say for sure.
In any case, if I have to do it, make it quick. I let Chitanda into my room, where I would be asking her for more details. There were two chairs and a small table near the window, so we took a seat there. Now, then...

"Did you see the hanged shadow in the room right across yours?"

I asked while opening the window and looking at the main building.

"Yes, that's right."

"How big was it."

"My mind was quite hazy then, so I'm not really sure, but I think it should be approximately human-sized. As for the shape... I'm sorry, but I cannot remember. It was only after hearing Mayaka-san talk about the hanged shadow that i thought of it as the shadow of a person."

Chitanda's voice grew softed as she tried to recall last night's events. It seems that she's really not sure. To support her curiosity, Chitanda has exceptional powers of observation and memory, and for that to be unclear means that she must have been really tired last night. However, since I didn't see a shadow or whatever it was, I could only rely on Chitanda's memory, not matter how vague it is. I continued.

"What color was it?"

"I don't know. It's not because I cannot remember, but because it was just a shadow."

I tried to imagine what Chitanda saw, but I couldn't do it. The word "shadow" was just too vague.

"A shadow, huh. In other words, there was a light source, and you saw a human shadow against the light, right?"

"If what we saw was not a supernatural phenomenon, I think that would be correct."

"A light source..."

I turned to look at the main building again.

"A light source at night would have been the moon..."

My own voice was filled with doubt.

"I think so too. The moon was quite large last night. But something seems... Ah."

Chitanda, who was looking at the main building, raised her voice. That's right. Whether it was the moon or a searchlight, a shadow could not have been formed. All the wooden shutters of all the rooms in the main building were closed.

"Chitanda, what time did you sleep?"

"Er, around ten. We were all tired, and I had promised to take a bath with Mayaka-san this morning, so we slept early."

"What was the state of the shutters at that time?"

Chitanda thought for a while and answered.

"I think they were closed. I cannot say for sure, but the main building was pitch dark."

"Hm."

If the shutters were closed, there couldn't have been a shadow. This is

becoming a hassle. I scratched my head. It's troublesome, but we would probably have to go to the main building and take a look at room seven, where the shadow was seen.

Chitanda said with a grin,

"How nice! It's just like a mystery! With this kind of pleasures, I'm glad we took this trip!"

You're the only one enjoying this, though.

We could easily enter the main building by using the connecting walkway. However, there was a rope tied at the end of the passage, and there was a card with the words "People unrelated to the construction work are prohibited from entering" hanging down from the rope. Chitanda was really hesitant to duck under the rope. Well, I guess it would be bad if we somehow got into some trouble. We should probably seek permission from someone in the inn.

However, if we told the owners that we were investigating the hanged shadow, it would be bad for Rie, who had told us not to tell anyone else. If we want to get permission, we should approach one of the Zenna sisters.

As luck would have it, at the exact moment, Kayo passed by us. When I called her to stop, Kayo's body stiffened in shock, but she relaxed when she saw Chitanda beside me.

"Yes, what is it?"

I turned to look at Chitanda.

"Eh?"

"Please handle this."

I'm bad with young, innocent kids.

"Okay. Kayo-san, we would like to enter the main building, is that alright?"

"The main building? Why?"

"I believe you heard it during breakfast, but we are investigating the hanged shadow that Mayaka-san and I saw. Could you please show us to room seven?"

I understand that honesty is a virtue and that you like approaching a problem head-on, but your phrasing probably needs some work, Chitanda.
As expected, Kayo shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but I can't right now. Onee-chan... will get mad at me."

Well, it can't be helped. Come to think of it, it would have been difficult to ask to enter someone's house simply out of curiosity. I quickly gave up on physically examining room seven, and asked a question instead.

"Then at least tell us this. Is that room still used for guests?"

I had no ill intentions, but perhaps I said it too forcefully, Kayo retreated a little and frowned. However, she still answered my question.

"No. Guests only use the bathroom and the dining hall in the main building."

"Okay..."

"The second floor is used for storage... Can I go now?"

I nodded.

"Thanks. You were very helpful."

But Kayo turned tail and ran off somewhere before I could even complete my sentence. I folded my arms sadly.

"Looks like she doesn't like me."

But Chitanda just smiled upon seeing our exchange.

"Don't worry, I'm sure she's just afraid of big men. That's so cute! Ah, having a little sister would be great!"

She exclaimed ecstatically. Hm, cute, huh?

The sun was steadily rising, and it was getting hotter. I wiped my sweaty forehead with the back of my hand. Chitanda, however, with her superhuman resistance to heat, was unruffled.

"Is it a problem if we cannot enter room seven?"

"It's not so much a problem as it is a hassle."

I headed to the entranceway with Chitanda. Since we can't examine the scene from inside, I intended to investigate from outside. I was leaning over to take off my shoes at the entranceway meant for both guests and the Zenna family, when Chitanda said excitedly,

"Ah, that brings back memories!"

What Chitanda had found was two radio exercise attendance cards placed near the shoe rack. One belonged to Rie, who had written her name in large letters, while the other, which had no name, probably belonged to Kayo. Rie's attendance card was stamped sparsely for the start of the summer holidays, but was empty for the later part. On the other hand, Kayo seemed to be exercising every morning without fail.

Chitanda picked up the two cards.

"Morning radio exercises... I haven't done these in two years!"

You continued doing this until the second year of middle school... Seriously?

I've never done this if you exclude the time when I was extremely young. When exactly did I set my heart on becoming an energy-saver?

We went out to the garden and were instantly surrounded by the humid air and the strong smell of greenery.

We looked up at where room seven was in the main building. The shutters were still closed. Chitanda invited me to look at the back of the building,

and when I was heading there, I accidentally kicked up some water.
"Oops."

The muddy water that I had kicked up flew towards Chitanda's feet and stained her shoes.

"Sorry."

"It's alright."

The ground was still muddy because the annex was blocking the morning sunlight. I thought that some of the water was contributed by the plants in the area, but that did not seem to be the case. I noticed that the areas with exposure to sunlight were almost dry, meaning that quite some time had passed after the ground became wet. I asked,

"Chitanda, did it rain last night?"

"Yes. I don't know the exact time, but there was a passing shower."

We went around the main building. It was my intention to examine room seven from the other side, but the shutters there were also closed. However, both the east and west shutters had to be open for a shadow to be formed.

As I crossed my arms, I noticed Chitanda also crossing her arms, as if she was thinking about something. I was about to ask her for her thoughts when the window in front of us opened and Kayo spoke.

"Um... It's time for lunch."

I checked my watch. Indeed, it was about to be noon. Time to take a break.

Lunch was chilled ramen, which was delicious. It's not like we had to withstand high temperatures in this high ground, but I welcomed the refreshing taste. The six of us were sitting around the dinner table. Ibara

asked a question while moving her chopsticks.
"So, did you find anything out?"

"No, not yet..."

I continued after Chitanda.

"We're still just starting to look into it. I do have a theory, though."

"Oh? Then let's hear your theory."

That would be quite difficult, for my thoughts on the matter were still vague and hard to grasp. I didn't respond, but Satoshi grumbled with obvious displeasure.

"What are the three of you talking about? We've been together for so long, and you're going to be so cruel as to leave me out of the loop?"

An exaggerated protest, as expected of Satoshi. I didn't really want to spend time explaining it to him, so I responded with a question instead.

"Out of the loop or not, where did you go? I haven't seen you all day."

"You're supposed to use a hot spring multiple times a day, whenever you feel like it."

Is that how it works? I don't think I'll dare to go to a hot spring after last night's incident.

I hadn't even finished half my plate when two people clasped their hands in succession.

"Thank you for the meal."

"Thank you for the meal."

It was the sisters, Rie and Kayo. Rie took her own table ware and headed for the main building. Kayo followed suit after a brief moment. Chitanda smiled happily on witnessing that scene. Apparently she found it to be charming.

"It must be wonderful to have a sister. I sure envy those two."

"Oh? Did you wish you had a sibling?"

"No, I wouldn't go so far as to say that I wish for one. Do you have any siblings, Fukube-san?"

Satoshi then started a discourse about his little sister. I've met her before, but she's an arrogant oddball who doesn't want to conform to society. The same can be said of my sister.

We finished lunch while talking about that topic. At that moment, Rie, who had gone to the main building, returned.

With a "Ta-da", Rie appeared in a yukata. It wasn't the kind of yukata worn after taking a wearisome, distasteful bath, but a yukata meant for parading around at firework festivals. It was a light blue that can be said to have the color of water, and the pattern of waves and plovers embroidered on it looked pretty cool. Rie seemed to be extremely proud of it.

"What do you think of my yukata?"

"Wow!" Chitanda cheered.

"It's wonderful!"

"Yeah, it suits you. You look really grown-up in it."

Rie gave a huge smile on being praised.

"My parents bought it for me at the start of the summer break because my grades improved. Let's go to the fireworks festival tonight! I've been preparing so long for it!"

While the three of them were engrossed with the yukata, Satoshi took a sidelong glance at me and spoke in a voice that only I could hear.

"It does look good."
Knowing Satoshi's usual roundabout way of talking, I clearly understood

what he was trying to say. I whispered back at him.

"Then what's bad?"

"The obi[17]. The obi is like the life of a kimono, but that one's an imitation."

I looked at it again. The butterfly knot was certainly floating strangely, but Satoshi's words seemed out of place.

"Why would it be radioactive?"

"I said 'imitation', not 'mutation'... The butterfly not is a separate part of the obi. It may be easy to fit on, but it's not in my philosophy to call that a yukata."

Who cares about your philosophy? It'll be noticed by the experienced eye, but otherwise no one would be able to tell the difference. How stupid, I thought as I yawned and stretched.

It was at the moment.

"...Hmm?"

I felt a presence. I turned back to look at the open sliding screen.

But I didn't see anyone. That's weird, I'm pretty sure I saw a human shadow flit by. Have I also been afflicted by the curse of the hanged shadow?

"What's the matter?"

I ignored Satoshi's question.

A human shadow, huh.

I left the room. It would be nice if I could find a room to calmly think. I noticed that Chitanda was following me. I wanted to tell her not to come, but and idea formed in my head. How about we go to yesterday's bath house? I turned around and suggested this to Chitanda, who smiled and

nodded.

On the way to the bath house, I stayed quiet and gathered my thoughts. Observing my state, Chitanda also kept silent.

The hanged shadow. That's just a withered flower, a product of Ibara and Chitanda's mistaken observations. It'll be difficult, but they probably wouldn't mind me declaring it to be so. However, something is missing...

We reached the ope-air bath. Before we parted, Chitanda spoke.

"Let's go back together."

I couldn't answer.

When I passed the counter and entered the changing room, I felt a sense of déjà vu. I understood the reason right away. It was because the placement of objects was exactly the same as last night. A set of clothes with a pair of cargo pants was placed in a basket by my feet. That would be Satoshi. But this was more mysterious than the hanged shadow. Wasn't Satoshi still in his seat when we left? Did he use a teleporter?

When I entered the bathing area, Satoshi was already immersed in the water, as expected. I stayed outside the bath and stared at Satoshi, who noticed even though he did not see me clearly. He then turned around and accounted for his presence.

"Well, if you slide down the slope behind Seizansou, you come out right behind here."

I was not at all surprised by that statement. It would indeed be Satoshi's style to slide down a slope just for a shortcut.

I immersed myself in the bath. I wiped my head with a tower, trying to clear the haze from my brain, which did not seem to be working. For the annoying problems the Classics Club has encountered, or in other words the

questions that Chitanda brought in, the solutions had to be accepted by Chitanda. But no matter how much I rack my brain, I can't think of a way to explain the hanged shadow that would satisfy Chitanda.

The one thing missing was basically why. The true form of the shadow was not difficult to deduce, but if I can't explain why it was there, then an adequate explanation to Chitanda is impossible. I do have something in mind, though.

I traversed my memory speechlessly for a while. Seeing that I didn't stir an inch and perhaps thinking back to last night's incident, Satoshi broke the silence.

"Houtarou? Did you seriously get dizzy again?"

Satoshi, huh? He just might know something. I tried asking him.

"Hey, were there any events last night?"

Satoshi was taken aback at the sudden question, but his original smile immediately returned.

"Last night's highlight would definitely be you losing consciousness."

"I'm really indebted to you, but I won't repeat my thanks. Anything else?"

"Well, as you know, we were telling ghost stories last night. I had two flowers in each hand, with one flower to spare[18]."

Flowers, huh. When all's said and done, Chitanda would be the lotus flower and Ibara would be the thistle.

"No, I don't mean private events. Do you know any official ones?"

"Hmm, I'm not that sure about official, since I'm not a resident here... Well, there was the summer festival. Couldn't you hear the drums?"
Summer festival.

I see, so there was something like that... As I thought, there was a summer

festival.

Satoshi would usually notice my satisfaction and would probably make fun of me. However, half his face was immersed in the water, and his eyes appeared drowsy and lacking in energy, so he didn't notice anything. I would answer if he asked me a question, but it seems that Satoshi didn't need to ask me anything. I got up from the bath.

I wore my clothes and went outside, but Chitanda hadn't left yet. The hot and cool sensations helped me put my thoughts together while I waited. Before long, Chitanda came out, and we went off.

On the way back to the inn, I started a conversation with Chitanda.

"That hanged shadow you saw... was probably just a yukata on a hanger."

"Eh?"

Chitanda was shocked by the sudden answer. I waited for her to digest my words, then continued.

"It isn't impossible to see the silhouette of a yukata as the shadow of a person, even if you aren't drowsy. If it was not a ghost, it would have to be some sort of clothes shaped like a dress that was dangling from the ceiling, right?"

Chitanda was speechless for a moment, then tilted her head, indicating that she couldn't accept that theory.

"But why would a yukata be there of all places? And it would be weird for someone to open the shutters specifically so we could see it hanging."

"It wasn't so you could see it."

I took a fleeting glance at the sky.

"It was to dry it. The yukata was wet. The windows were open to let the wind in so it would dry faster."

"Why?"

"The yukata was wet because it rained."

"No, I mean why was it hanging in room seven?"

"So no one could see it being dried."

"But we saw it!"

"No, it was to hide it from the rest of the family."

It seems that I've made no progress. I scratched my head.

In a beat, I started explaining my theory from the very beginning.

"The one who hung the yukata up to dry was Kayo.

"Kayo was envious of Rie's yukata and wanted to try it on. However, no matter how well the yukata fitted Kayo, it belonged to Rie, and I'm sure Rie wouldn't lend it to her. Didn't you notice? Rie wrote her name on her cup and radio exercise card, making sure everyone clearly knows what's hers. She's a possessive person. Furthermore, Kayo was afraid of Rie and couldn't possible ask her to lend the yukata.

"But Kayo still wanted to wear it, so she secretly took it out. Fortunately for her, the obi was attached to the yukata, so she could put it on by herself. Also, since she's a daughter of the inn owners, I'm sure cleaning up after wearing the yukata would be her forte. Anyway, she wore it to the summer festival last night, at around eight. Well, she must have enjoyed herself."

"Kayo-san went to the summer festival? How do you know that?"

"I heard from Satoshi that there was a summer festival last night. As to why I know Kayo went there, it's because I noticed someone leaving the house last night, before eight. Kayo wasn't around for the ghost stories, right?"

This morning, Kayo was blaming Rie for telling the story of the hanged shadow. If they were together in the room when Rie was telling the story, Kayo wouldn't have said it only in the morning. Moreover, according to Satoshi, there were only three girls in the room. In his words, he had two flowers in each hand, with one to spare.

"I guessed so. When Kayo was having fun in the festival, she ran into some trouble."

Chitanda took a deep breath.

"It started raining.

"Based on the dryness of the ground, the rain probably abated after a short while, but the yukata was soaked. At that moment, Rie remembered that Kayo had planned to play with fireworks the next day. She knew that Rie was undoubtedly going to wear the yukata then. Kayo had to find a way to dry the yukata by then. She was probably scared stiff.

"However, if she dried it on the first floor of the main building, it might be seen by someone, and the annex was out of the question. She couldn't use the dryer that late at night, either. So, Kayo waited for everyone to fall asleep, then she snuck into the second floor of the main building to dry the yukata, in the most distant room.

"But bad luck befell her again. With the windows open, the moonlight made it look like a hanged shadow to you and Ibara. Since the moonlight came from the west, it was after midnight, probably around three of four o'clock.

"And even worse, we began to look into the hanged shadow. Just now, at lunch, the two sisters quickly left the room. Rie wanted to show off her yukata, but Kayo... She probably felt like she was on a bed of thorns."

I continued walking after explaining my theory. At that moment, I remembered Kayo stiffening at the sight of me. This must have been the reason. She must have been really frightened.

"Kayo returned the yukata in the morning. Quite early in the morning... For the exact time, you could check the radio broadcast schedule, since Kayo diligently participates in the morning exercise. She probably returned the

yukata before that."

" ....."

"We should probably keep this from Ibara. If it was somehow leaked to Rie, Kayo would be in big trouble. You never know what could happen."

Chitanda simply cast her eyes down speechlessly and continued walking.

While we were on that long, gentle slope, Chitanda eventually murmured without raising her head,

"But then....that would mean that those two don't get along."

That was a point I hadn't considered. Ignoring my bewilderment, Chitanda continued.

"For those two who can't even lend a yukata to each other, their relationship can't be described as close at all."

She said while giving me a faint smile. Her lips were curved, but her expression was one of sorrow. This is not the first time I've seen her like this.

I barely managed to open my mouth.

"Isn't that pretty normal, for siblings? Like my sister . "
"I..."

It seems that Chitanda didn't hear my words. It was almost as if she was talking to herself.

"I've always wanted a sibling. A respectable older sister, or a cute younger brother..."

We walked on clad in our yukatas. Summer hadn't ended yet. There were

gigantic columns of clouds before our eyes, and it was somewhat disheartening to see them suddenly disappear.

As we caught sight of Seizansou, Chitanda finally continued her sentence.

"But I'm sure that I understood that the hanged shadow was no ghost. I probably also knew whether all siblings in the world were truly happy..."

I did not wish to hear more of this. Thankfully, Chitanda did not continue.

We slowly ascended the gentle slope which was surrounded by dense greenery. I knew it from the very beginning. The siblings that Chitanda mentioned were just like apparitions. When you observe closely, they turn out to be just withered flowers.

As the damp heat permeated my body, which had been in a hot bath a short while ago, I started sweating profusely. There was a figure on the hill who turned to face us. As we drew closer, the figure turned out to be Rie, who was waving vigorously.

4 - Those Who Know Something

4.1

Suppose that one day, I took a microphone and said, "Today will be sunny." Someone who heard me might think, "I guess Oreki Houtarou-kun is testing his microphone." But another person might think, "Oreki Houtarou-kun is broadly asserting that today will be sunny." Whichever deduction is valid, whichever deduction matches the truth, can only be said to be a matter of luck. To increase the chances of that, one would have to gather as much detailed data as possible, but usually it would be absolutely impossible to expect such information to fall into one's hands. Furthermore, even if one managed to collect data that goes into the minutest details, all that would achieve is a higher possibility for truth and theory to coincide, and nothing more.

It was the first day of November. Only Chitanda and I were present in the clubroom. It was that time after class in autumn when idleness flows around, when one does not give a thought about the dangerous, disturbing occurrences in the world like arson, robbery, counterfeit notes and assassinations. With my energy-conserving principle, for me to talk on and on indignantly just to make a point is uncharacteristic of me and can be attributed to Chitanda trying to praise me for my role in the Hyouka incident.

From her words, it was as if I had within me some sort of special ability to deduce the truth all the time. I don't mind being looked down upon and laughed at, but I can't ignore being praised highly. I added,

"To conclude, I don't mind if you call me lucky, but please stop making me out to be an amazing person."

Knowing my extremely gently and reticent personality, Chitanda was taken aback by my rare outburst and her eyes widened. But before long, she nodded and smiled gently, as if she understood my feelings.

"You're so modest, Oreki-san!"

Nope, she didn't understand at all.

It's been almost half a year since we entered Kamiyama High School. Since then, Chitanda's curiosity has found the abnormal in the everyday scenery with just one glance. It is certainly true that I've been involved in helping Chitanda understand the reasons behind those abnormalities. It would be a lie to say that I did nothing for the Hyouka incident and the Empress incident. Also, unbeknownst to Chitanda, I did a little work behind the scenes of the Juumoji incident.

But it would be best to set things straight right now.

"Chitanda, the ancients said some wise words."

"What did they say?"

"'Theory and ointment will stick to anything.' Admittedly, ointment doesn't exactly stick on every surface, but that has nothing to do with the matter at hand."

I said seriously, but for some reason Chitanda elegantly hid her mouth with her hand and giggled. She turned to me as I felt a little morose.

"Oreki-san occasionally says phrases that are never used."

... Is that so? I hadn't noticed.

"But that's not the issue here," I wanted to reply, but Chitanda continued with a smile still on her face.

"I'm not sure why you would want to use that phrase, but... Ah, I get it. Let's assume that the reason you managed to find the truth so many times was not talent, but luck.

"But wouldn't you call the ability to reason out theories, or the ability to apply a plaster[19] to bridge the gap between clues a talent in itself? Even if a sowed seed bears fruit due to luck, it would not be worth considering if the seed was not sowed in the first place."

I folded my arms and groaned. There was indeed reason behind her argument.

But I would not admit defeat that easily.
"So you're saying that I'm an expert in affixing plasters?"

"Is that wrong?"

I responded to Chitanda's gentle smile with the most composed one I could manage.

"Yes, sometimes I have no inkling of the logic behind my theories, myself."

My statement was immediately countered.

"That's because you don't use ordinary reasoning."

That's kind of true, but... I felt a little disheartened at being identified time and again with that trait.

But I firmly stood my ground.

"Then how about this, Chitanda. Come up with some sort of situation. I'll prove that you can't make a theory for anything so easily."

I haven't called for a contest against anyone before, but I can't back out now, when my life's at stake.

Chitanda's large eyes widened even more. Based on my observations of Chitanda thus far, it was mainly because of her immense curiosity about the game I proposed, rather than her amusement towards the situation.

"That sounds fun! Then... what should we go with?"

It was when those eyes were wandering around, searching for a question.

The speaker that was fixed on the top of the blackboard and used for schoolwide announcements crackled into life. Our eyes turned to look at it at the same time.

Without any preface, the announcement started.

"Anyone who, on October 31st, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and who knows something, report to Shibazaki in the Staff Room immediately."

It was spoken somewhat rapidly. The announcement was then cut off without hesitation.

We dropped our gaze from the speaker at the same time.

"I wonder what that was about."

"No idea."

I said, while noticing that Chitanda's mouth was beginning to open and her head was slightly tilted. I thought that she seemed happy about something and predicted what she would say next. As expected, she spoke in a lively tone.

"Let's use that announcement! Please come up with a theory about what that announcement just now was about!"

Hm.

I arrogantly nodded.

"Fine, I accept your challenge."

I'll show you just what an untrustworthy guy I am!

4.2

"Let's write it down so that we don't forget."

As soon as I finished my sentence, Chitanda retrieved a notebook from her bag. She then took out a ballpoint pen designed to look like a fountain pen and flipped the notebook to a blank page.

"Anyone who, on October 31st, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and who knows something, report to Shibazaki in the Staff Room immediately."

Chitanda's memory was scary. That was probably the announcement word for word. After writing it out in her elegant handwriting that could be used as a model for penmanship, Chitanda put the pen down, while I looked at the note and folded my arms.

"First, I need to know what everything means. Do you know what 'Koubundou' is?"

Chitanda nodded.

"The announcement mentioned that it's in front of the station, but to be more accurate it's a short distance away from the station. It's a small stationery shop that is run by an elderly couple and has been there for a long time."

"Have you gone there before?"

"Yes, but only once."

I was thinking about my own question, and realized that I haven't gone to a stationery shop recently, since it's easier to get stationery from a bookshop or convenience store nowadays. However, there would still be shops that specialize in selling stationery, I suppose.

"Does it sell any special stationery, like expensive paintbrushes, or that strange sheet that Ibara uses for drawing manga?"

"That would be a screen tone... But no, it's a really small store, so it would

not have such unusual goods. North Elementary is nearby, so it sells everything an elementary school student would need."

I see.

I looked at the words on the notebook again.
"Is Shibazaki a teacher here?"

Chitanda giggled.

"Oreki-san, have you always been bad with names? Shibazaki-sensei is a head teacher here."

Ah, now I remember hearing that name at the opening ceremony. There was a head teacher with almost no hair and another with an abundance of white hair, but I don't know which one is Shibazaki. Well, I guess it doesn't really matter.

Right, now there should be no more unknown words. "If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick." I subscribe to this idle life philosophy, but this is an important contest. I'll need to put some energy into this.

I examined the notebook for another ten seconds, then slowly opened my mouth.

"First..."

"First?"

"We known that Shibazaki is trying to call a student."

A forced smile formed on Chitanda's face, as if she was trying to laugh at a boring joke.

"Yes. I can see that too."

Her words seemed to indicate that she was trying to be patient, so I justified my thoroughness."

"This is a contest. I have to be careful about this."

I then continued.

"Let's call this person 'Student X'."
"... This feels like a real investigation!"

"At this point, we don't know if Student X refers to singular or multiple students."

If multiple students were being called, the person giving the announcement would have said "Everyone who shopped at Koubundou" or "Those who shopped at Koubundou", but that's quite a weak argument.

But my next deduction could not be doubted.

"Shibazaki probably intends to give Student X educational guidance. In other words, he's going to scold them for some reason."

On hearing that, Chitanda titled her head and stared fixedly at the words on the notebook. After a while, she looked up and tilted her head once more in doubt.

"Why do you say that?"

I answered confidently.

"Because a student will only get called to the staff room for something bad, based on my experience."

"Oreki-san...are you really taking this seriously?"

"I haven't been this serious since I entered this school. You might even say that this is the first time I've been so serious."

Chitanda sank into silence, so I added,

"Furthermore, if he wanted to commend them, he wouldn't use a phrase like 'Anyone who shopped at Koubundou and who knows something', which can refer to a good or bad thing. He would be more direct about it. No

student would feel good being called out like that, myself included. The way he worded it, anyone who did know something might be too scared to go."
"That sounds right."

She agreed, huh. I was half-joking when I said that, though.

Time to move on.

I chased the thoughts around my head and arranged them in order.

"By saying 'Koubundou in front of the station', it indicates that Koubundou isn't a very well known store."

"Well, you didn't know it too."

"Yes, but X should known Koubundou. There's no need to intentionally say the phrase 'in front of the station'."

However, Chitanda promptly responded.

"That is because there are three stores with the name Koubundou in Kamiyama City. Besides the stationery shop in front of the station, there is also a shop selling Buddhist altar equipment near Kamiyama Commercial High School, as well as a bookstore by the highway."[20]

Is that so.

What else, I thought as I folded my arms, lowered my chin, and stared at the words again. A groaning sound filled the back of my throat.

What would a normal school announcement be like? Obviously, it would clearly state the name of the student being called out, but what else is missing? As I thought along those lines, I was struck by a flash of inspiration.

"Whatever this student is being called for, it's urgent. Shibazaki's in a hurry."

Using a ballpoint pen, Chitanda pointed at the word "immediately" on the transcript.

"He did say 'immediately'."

"No, they always say that when they call someone. That's not what I meant."

I continued as Chitanda stared in puzzlement.

"There's a standard format for school announcements, but this one was done differently, so we know they're in a rush."

"Huh..."

"Let's say you wanted to call me to Classroom 1-A. How would you say it?"

Chitanda thought for a short while, then brought her hand near her mouth and cleared her throat.

"I see. It would be something like this. 'Oreki Houtarou-san from Class 1-B, please see Chitanda Eru in Classroom 1-A immediately."

"That's all? Weren't there other announcements today other than the one earlier? Try remembering how they went."

Chitanda closed her mouth tightly and thought for a moment. Judging from the continual tilting of her head, I expected that she would take a while to comprehend, so I divulged the answer, thinking that I should hurry.

"I'd say it like this: 'Chitanda Eru from Class 1-A, please see Oreki Houtarou in Classroom 1-B immediately."

"What's the difference?"

"I repeat. Chitanda Eru from Class 1-A, please see Oreki Houtarou in Classroom 1-B immediately."

A gasp escaped from Chitanda's mouth.

"It's not only for school announcements. Most announcements like this are

usually repeated, because there's a high chance that they will be missed if they are only said once. However, this announcement was only read once. Since this differs from the usual format, we can say that they're in a rush."

Chitanda nodded grandly, indicating that she fully accepted that reasoning.

Having made the point that the announcer was in a hurry, I kept having the strange feeling of chess pieces falling one after another. Instead of finding out what that strange feeling meant, I went with the flow and continued with my deduction.

"And not just any rush. We can tell that this is an emergency."

"What do you mean?"

I suddenly realized that Chitanda and I were both leaning forward too much. Sensing the proximity of those huge eyes, I retreated and settled down.

"Because this announcement was made after school."

Chitanda, who was leaning forward, pouted in dissatisfaction.

"Please don't skip the steps in your reasoning."

"Skip! What a lovely ring to it!"

"Oreki-san!"

Hmm, that went badly. Chitanda was now looking at me with upturned eyes.

Well, it wasn't exactly my intention to skip the reasoning. I just felt that I would forget the points that I had thought of if I didn't first state the conclusion. In any case, I should probably proceed with the explanation of my reasoning rather than account for my speech pattern. Imitating Chitanda, I cleared my throat.

"Doesn't that make sense? Regardless of the circumstances, it's inefficient

to make an announcement after school. Kamiyama High does have a lot of clubs, but not all students stay in school and exert their energy on club activities. There is a considerable number of students who go home immediately after school. A normal announcement should be made at a time when all students can be assumed to be present, like during lunch break, or the time before and after home room. But they still made the announcement, after school, because..."

I stopped talking and thought for a while.

"Firstly, the reason behind calling out the student occurred after school. Furthermore, it's so important that they can't wait for tomorrow to do it. To exaggerate, Shibazaki made the announcement, betting on the possibility that X hadn't gone home yet."

As I spoke, I realized that my expression had stiffened. Chitanda had been smiling due to her enjoyment of the game, but her smile had disappeared, while her eyes were now filled with seriousness.

Chitanda spoke in a soft voice.

"Oreki-san... This smells like quina, doesn't it?"

Quina?

"...Chitanda, the common phrase is 'smells fishy'."[21]

"Eh? I can't say that it smells like quina? It's the plant that quinine is made of."

"The language council will get angry if you go around mixing up phrases like that."

I laughed it off with a Satoshi-style joke, but I was actually thinking the same thing as Chitanda. This game seemed to be heading in an ominous direction.

As I thought about this, another strange point appeared.

"Next deduction. Shibazaki doesn't want to make public whatever he wants

to talk to X about. We can't tell if it's only for now, or if it'll never be publicly known."

"Because he didn't say why X was called out?"

That's certainly a way to look at it.

But here was a chance for me to show off.

"That's true, but there's another way to explain it more clearly."

Chitanda stared sharply at the note, as if that would dispel all her doubts. Since Chitanda's facial features were more gentle, unlike Ibara's, her look wasn't so intense, but it was still with a force that seemed like it could cut through paper. However, I poured cold water on her excitement.

"You won't find anything just by staring at the words. Or rather, there's something, although it doesn't seem like it."

"No, I don't get it."

I nodded at Chitanda, who had raised her head.

"Shibazaki is the head teacher. There would be one in every high school across the country, but educational guidance would be the job of the Student Counseling Department, even for Kamiyama High."

"That's true. Morishita-sensei usually makes these kinds of announcements."

"The Student Counseling Department would have their own Counseling Room, right?"

"Yes, it's on the second floor of the main building."

Chitanda followed up spontaneously, probably trying to speed up the discussion. Being taken in by that reaction, I started speaking a little quicker.

"But X was called by the head teacher Shibazaki to the staff room. Isn't that

an act that exceeds his authority? The head teacher, who should be in charge of the management of the school, bypassed the Student Counseling Department and called the student to go directly to him. This means that the problem is major enough that they need to keep it classified at an administrative level."

At least, it could be. The whole Student Counseling Department could have collectively collapsed to food poisoning or something, but we can ignore these special cases. After all, if we start considering that those involved in the incident were hit by unthinkable coincidences or that they had eccentric behavior, we might as well just declare that aliens are somehow connected. It would be best to assume that everyone in this case were normal human beings.

I temporarily closed my mouth.

In the silence that followed, Chitanda nodded a few times, probably ruminating on the discussion so far. After a while, she looked into my eyes.

With a stifled voice, Chitanda muttered.

"If we assume your theory is correct, that would mean that X-san is involved in something very bad..."

"You might as well say it clearly."

"Then..."

I nodded.

"The conclusion drawn from the other deductions thus far: X is involved in a crime."

4.3

X is involved in a crime.

I laughed at the improbability of my own words, and regained my composure.

That's right, what I'm doing with Chitanda right now is just a game. My theory doesn't have to be true, and anyway, didn't I agree to do this to prove that my deductions do not always match reality? I guess I'll just take it easy.

Perhaps noticing that my emotions had settled, Chitanda also seemed to be more relaxed. With a calm voice, she asked,

"So what might this crime be?"

I held out my hand to stop Chitanda.

"Wait. Before we get to that, I have an additional deduction. Assuming that all theories thus far have been sound, there are no police at this school, so there's a high chance that a related official is here."

"An organization related to the police?"

"There are many of them, like the District Public Prosecutor Office's Special Investigation Department, and the National Tax Agency. The high chance of someone from one of these organizations being here is because of something we touched on earlier... Do you know what it is?"

Chitanda's gaze fell to the ground as she wondered about it for a while, but she eventually gave up and shook her head. Seeing that, I nodded lightly.

"I believe it was near the end of our discussion about calling out someone after school. No matter how you look at it, it's illogical to make an announcement after school, when many students have gone home. But they still made the announcement, so as mentioned earlier, it was because the reason for the announcement happened after school."

I unfolded my arms and pointed at a phrase in the notebook.

"However, if a crime did occur, it happened on the 31st of October. Yet the announcement was made today, just now, and in a hurry. We can take this to mean that the investigators only just made the request."

"But they could also have made the request over the phone."

"That might be true, but it should be safe to assume that the investigators want to apprehend X. To do that, they would need to come here in person."

"Apprehend..."

Chitanda muttered with an anxious look on her face. Did she just regain her emotions after cooling down a few moments ago? It certainly wouldn't be impossible for Chitanda...

Chitanda asked with that worried expression,

"Oreki-san, do you mean to say that you think X-san is responsible for the crime?"

I couldn't understand the purpose of that question.

"What do you mean by 'responsible'?"

"I mean, do you think that X-san is not a victim or an eyewitness, but someone who is involved with the culprit?"

I see.

I answered immediately.

"That's right."

"....."

"If that's not the case, Shibazaki wouldn't have needed to be so flustered. He could have made the announcement the next day, when everyone was present, right?"

Chitanda nodded reluctantly.

Right, time for the crux of the mystery. Just like how both of us had looked up at the speakers at the same time, we looked down at the notebook in unison.

"So, what is that crime?

"Exactly what crime did X, who 'on October 31st, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and knows something', commit? What do you think, Chitanda? Does anything come to mind?"

Chitanda placed her index finger on her lip and immediately answered.

"Sadly, I would have to say that shoplifting comes to mind first."

Who or what is she even feeling sad for?

"Or... another possibility would be that the crime was committed at a completely different place, and the investigators learned of someone fitting the culprit's description shopping at Koubundou. Based on that testimony, they came here to search. In that case, the crime could be... just about anything."

Hmm, quite an interesting theory given the little time she had.

However, I shook my head.

"Besides shoplifting, none of the others are possible."

"Why not?"

"If we take your theory to be true, the investigators would know the particular characteristics of X. With that information, it would be strange for Shibazaki to call for someone who 'shopped at Koubundou and knows something'. Since the incident occured at Koubundou, we can assume that X appeared to be shopping..."

As I said that, I felt that something was out of place.

As I tried to pinpoint the source of that feeling, I abruptly shut my mouth. Noticing my countenance, Chitanda also waited silently.

Was that announcement a message to the culprit to turn themselves in? No, that doesn't feel quite right.

"Theory: The investigators don't know anything about X."

"That's what you have been saying, right?"

"But they believe that X will reveal themselves after the announcement."

That's it, that's the part which is out of place.

If I were the culprit and I heard that announcement, I would be thinking along these lines: "The investigators still don't know I did it! I might be able to get away with it at this rate!" I would not appear in front of Shibazaki saying I did it.

What kind of circumstances would make the culprit turn themselves in after hearing that announcement?

I scratched my head lightly. I rested my chin on my hands and looked down at the notebook.

If someone felt remorse for their crime, they might turn themselves in. But in that case, X would have been caught already. There would be no need for today's announcement. What does that mean?

"Hmm. .... "

A sound escaped from my lips.

"Did you think of something?"

I did not answer, but instead looked at my watch. It was an exceptional product with both an analog and a digital display, as well as a calendar function, but these kinds of watches aren't rare nowadays.

"I see."

"What?"

"Let's put aside the question of what crime X committed for now. But let's assume that X regretted whatever they did, and apologized for it. In a letter."

Chitanda widened her eyes at the sudden logical leap. With a raised voice, she asked,

"W-Why do you say that? Did you really get that from the announcement just now?"

I countered with a question of my own.

"Chitanda, what's the date today?"

Chitanda was taken by surprise, but she didn't hesitate for long.

"It's the 1st of November."

I was aware that it was the first day of November, having just confirmed it with my watch.

I then pointed at the words on the notebook.

"Isn't yesterday 'October 31st', then?"

Chitanda tilted her head.

"Yes, that is true, but..."

"Didn't you notice? I didn't realize it until just now, but don't you find it strange? Why didn't Shibazaki say 'yesterday, at Koubundou in front of the station' instead?"

Chitanda gasped in surprise.
"Now that you mention it, it does seem unnatural."

"Why would he say 'October 31st', rather than 'yesterday'? That's because he had some script in front of him which contained the words 'October 31st', and he just read right off it.

"Now, what about the script? Why did the investigators know that X is involved, yet know nothing about them? Why did they believe that X would show up if they made the announcement? To phrase it differently, why did they think that X regrets what they did?"

I took a deep breath and paused for a while.

"Because X wrote a letter to Koubundou apologizing for what they did. It would be something like this: 'I'm really sorry, but on October 31st, I shopped at your store and committed a crime.' It would be unacceptable for a high school student to simply apologize, so it probably continued like this: 'I'll repay the damages, so please accept this and that.'

"The owners of Koubundou took that letter to the police. The police, or some similar investigation unit, came to Kamiyama High with the letter. This happened not long ago. And then Shibazaki, in a hurry, made the announcement while reading the letter. As he looked at the text, he said, 'On October 31st, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and who knows something'..."

"Wait a moment!"

A sharp voice broke through.

"According to your theory, X-san wanted to apologize to Koubundou, but didn't want to have the police involved if possible, right?"

Giving the letter of apology was not only to show remorse, but also to settle things quietly. I nodded.

"If that's the case, they would not have admitted that they were a Kamiyama High School student in their letter. It's strange that the police would know that. On the other hand, if they do not, they would have to request for announcements from all high school in Kamiyama City, and Shibazaki-sensei would not have been so rushed in his announcement. If there is the possibility that X is in another school, he would feel more at ease."

I see. That was sharp of her. I thought for a while.

"The police probably asked the owners of Koubundou if they might have any idea who did it. The owners then answered that it was probably a Kamiyama High student."

"...But how did they know?"

"It'd be obvious if X were wearing our uniform. Also, since you can get stationery at convenience stores nowadays, I don't think there would be a large crowd of people at Koubundou. Additionally, if X had done anything conspicuous at the time, the owners would naturally recall it."

"Anything conspicuous?"

I closed my mouth.

This part may be the key to figuring out exactly what crime X committed. In order to organize my thinking, I said my thoughts aloud.

"X did something to make themselves stand out. But that in itself wasn't a crime. They then committed a crime. But it was something that the owners wouldn't have immediately noticed if not for the letter. X regretted what they did. It was a deplorable crime. And whatever they did was enough to get the attention of the investigators. The crime X committed was..."

I glanced at Chitanda. Her white throat moved as she swallowed in apprehension.

I spoke.

"The crime was on a higher scale than petty theft."

"And that is?"

Time to press on.

I looked away from Chitanda's throat and looked at the part of the note which said, "Anyone who, on October 31st, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and knows something".

X was buying something. That has already been established.

At the same time, he was doing something conspicuous and was also committing a crime.

Koubundou carries equipment for elementary school students, so they probably don't have anything valuable.

That reminds me, the newspapers were crammed with disturbing reports of crimes, as usual. There was arson, robbery, murder, and...

I sighed deeply.

"Seriously..."

"Seriously?"

One high school student entered the shop that sells stationery to elementary school students in his free time. He placed a cheap item on the counter somewhat hesitatingly and took out a 10,000-yen note, thereby drawing attention to himself.

"X used a counterfeit 10,000-yen note to pay for his goods."

4.4

"But!"

Chitanda, who had kept silent and had not stirred an inch after my words, suddenly piped up. She then started talking on and on, her spell of silence having been broken with that one word.

"But but but that's impossible! It's unrealistic! It's illogical! This is a failure! A catastrophe!"

Seeing Chitanda's extreme vigor and sensing that she might just leap out of her seat and strangle me, I drew back my chair and retreated.

I stopped Chitanda with a hand gesture, while thinking that that was probably similar to calming down a violent bull.

"Ch-chitanda, please calm down. Ah that's right! I just remembered! This is just a game, right? You won't get anything out of it by being so serious."

"But it's impossible!"

Hmm. She used the word "impossible", instead of "unbelievable"?

I narrowed my eyes and asked Chitanda.

"What do you mean by impossible?"

Chitanda had both her hands on the table and was leaning over it, but she returned to her original position and coughed slightly, as if embarrassed by her own actions. She put on her usual expression and spoke.

"The counterfeit bills that have been used are 10,000-yen bills. You concluded that X-san used a 10,000-yen bill based on that news, right?"

I nodded.

"But there is no way X-san, a high school student, could have gotten their hands on one! Or even if they did, they should have been able to exchange it!"

"What do you mean?"

That was actually quite slow of me. I have no idea why I even asked Chitanda that question. Chitanda's face showed a flicker of irritation, but she continued.

"How did X-san, a high school student who does not sell anything, get hold of the counterfeit bill?"

I answered without giving it much thought.

"From an ATM, I suppose."

"It's no easy feat to forge bills good enough to trick an ATM or a bank! And if they were that good, it would be unusual for X-san to notice."

"Perhaps he received it as change?"

After saying that, I shut my mouth, taken aback by my own stupidity. I was fortunate that Ibara wasn't here. Who knows what mean things she would say about me? Since Chitanda was not Ibara, she looked at me and smiled instead of criticizing me.

"Exactly. It seems that you have realized. A 10,000-yen bill cannot be given as change. Apart from commemorative coin, the 10,000-yen bill is the largest bill in our country."

I finally understood why I asked Chitanda that question.

How did X get hold of that fake currency for him to be able to use it? A counterfeit bill is one made by an unlicensed source, and is made to be used in shops. When it does, it shouldn't be handed over to customers, and even if it's passed in between shops, it would eventually go to the bank. That's where it stops.

With furrowed eyebrows, I nodded by a few degrees.

"Well, I get what you're trying to say. Even if X's father ran a business, received a fake bill and gave it to X as pocket money..."

Satisfied, Chitanda nodded.

"X-san would have told their father. They would have asked their father to exchange the bill."

Kamiyama High prohibits her students from working part-time, but even if X did do it, that doesn't change anything. If X received their payment by bank transfer, there is no possibility of them even touching the fake note. On the other hand, if X received the money physically, they should have been able to request for an exchange, given that the employer is not overly unjust. Just like for the possibility of Student Counseling Department collectively collapsing due to food poisoning, I did not really consider the case for X's employer or father being so cruel as to reject that request, because that would be too nonsensical.

Now, then...

"Perhaps they picked it up?"

"Picked it up? You mean that the fake note was left on the road?"

"The forgers might have disposed of it to get rid of the evidence, for example."

It was quite an absurd theory, but only in its basis, and I didn't really care too much.

However, Chitanda shook her head.

"That would also be unlikely."

I was about to ask why, when I realized something strange.

Assuming that X went to school on both days, he would have delivered the note to Koubundou sometime between the end of yesterday's school day and the start of school today. Even if he didn't, the time frame for the delivery of the note would be from yesterday morning to today's announcement. The time taken for both cases is way too short.

X felt guilty while he was using the counterfeit bill. If not, he probably wouldn't have regretted his crime and apologized so quickly. It certainly wouldn't be possible for someone who uses a fake note he just picked up on an elderly couple to earn some small change.

"Hmm. The method of obtaining the bill, huh..."

If you don't figure that out, your whole theory would be like a tower built on sand."

Hey, you mentioned that I say rarely used phrases, but aren't you just the same?"

Even as I laugh it off, I have to appreciate Chitanda's focus. It might be a small thing, but as they say, a little leak will sink a great ship. How did X get hold of the fake note, and why did he have to use it?

Or is the theory that I've built up completely wrong, as Chitanda is saying?

A murmur escaped from my lips.

"10,000 yen, huh."

That's definitely not that large a sum of money that people would dream about it. But then again, it's also an amount that one would regret losing[22].

... I see. It's an amount that one would give up only with painful reluctance. I folded my arms.

"Chitanda, do you like money?"

Chitanda was a little flustered by the question, but she still answered.

"Yes, I suppose. I'll have to say that I like it rather than hate it."

"Would you be troubled over throwing away 10,000 yen?"

"I don't think so."

As if this was an important matter, Chitanda drew closer and added solemnly,

"... But only if it were not from an illegitimate source."

You sure are protected, Chitanda. People have killed for less, even in Japan.

But even as I thought this, I could understand what Chitanda was saying. If the 10,000 yen was rightfully mine, I definitely wouldn't want to lose it. If I did accidentally misplace it, I would even clean out the drains in the city in an attempt to find it. But if it were "illegitimate money", or in other words if it was money that was picked up, stolen, or earned from gambling, I would probably give it up as easy money. As they say, "Ill-gotten gains are soon spent."

That can be the only reason why X felt guilty and yet still used the counterfeit bill. He did not want to waste his own money. In that case, that 10,000 yen was not from an illegitimate source. Also, X is not a forger, or the accomplice of one. If that's the case...

"As I thought, X received the bill from someone."

Chitanda, who was staring at the notebook, looked up.

"And they received it as rightful money. If they did not get it as a salary or allowance, then there's only one possibility... It was given back to them in return for money they had previously lent.

"I'm sure X felt troubled after realizing that the money received was fake. They probably thought something like 'It was my money so why did this happen?' In any case, you can't really blame them for feeling guilty while wanting to use it at a shop run by an elderly couple."

As I finished, Chitanda placed her fist near her mouth and thought for a while. She eventually put down her fist and nodded, but she suddenly shook her head as she thought of something.

"But that doesn't change anything! X-san should still have been able to exchange the fake note!"

I replied calmly.

"Really? The counterfeit bill is like the Joker in Old Maid. No one wants to be holding it. In that case, I'd say this situation fits:

"'Yo X, here's the money I borrowed from you the other day.'

"'Ah, Y-senpai? Thank you very much. You could have returned the money later, though.'

"'It was 10,000 yen, right? Here.'

"'Thank you.'

"But to their surprise it turned out to be fake."

Chitanda didn't even grin at my solo act. Feeling awkward, I continued.

"Y, whom X lent the money to, was someone higher in social standing. That's why they couldn't object when Y gave them back a counterfeit. X could have noticed right after receiving the money, but Y could easily feign ignorance. Thus X got hold of the fake note under these circumstances."

I crossed my legs and continued.

"There was still the question of whether X is a single person or a group of people, but based on all this, we can say that X is only one person. It would be far too unnatural for two or three high schoolers to buy cheap stationery with a 10,000-yen bill together."

Chitanda still remained silent, making me wonder if she was actually listening.

There's still one more point that should be examined, I thought as I spoke.

"... So what about Y?"

"Y got hold of the counterfeit bill. Perhaps he got it from a Z higher up on the social ladder. But at some point it would have to return to the forger, a shop or the bank, as intended. We can group everyone above Y into Y as

well, and then we have the question: Who is Y? An unscrupulous shopkeeper? The forgers themselves?

"In the messy trail caused by the counterfeit notes, the only way out was to turn to a lone high schooler who fell to a sudden impulse. The police got involved with X in order to trace where the bill came from."

I sighed deeply and shrugged jokingly.

"That concludes my deduction."

I noticed that Chitanda was deeply seated in her chair, which was quite strange. Her palms were resting on her knees, her back was straightened, and she had a blank expression on her face. She was probably shocked by the conclusion, or tired out from the game.

But even so, I spent all that time and effort talking, and she doesn't say a word? How mean. I left Chitanda to her sullen silence and gazed out the window at Kamiyama City, where the color of autumn had begun to show. Since Kamiyama Station is somewhere over there, Koubundou should be in that area too, right?

Chitanda's muttering reached my eyes as I stood there.

"'Anyone who, on October 31st, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and who knows something, please report to Shibazaki in the Staff Room immediately.'"

She then spoke earnestly as I turned around.

"We've certainly come a long way from this."

"Yeah..."

I smiled and stretched.

"It's game over, then."

Chitanda raised her eyebrows at the word "game". Focus returned to her

eyes.

Chitanda's head tilted slightly.

"Oreki-san."

"What? This is just a game, you don't need to take it seriously."

"No, that's not it, but if that was a game, I have the feeling that you started it to prove something... What was it again?"

Ah.

Now that I think of it, I did want to do something like that.

I also tilted my head, to about the same angle as Chitanda's. After school, at the Geography Lecture Room, two people shrugged together.

"What was it?"

"I wonder."

"It you can't remember, there's no reason I would."

"... Then how about we try to deduce what that was?"

Chitanda's lips had slackened, and while her large eyes were equipped with seriousness, I could see that she was smiling. Ah, whatever. I smiled the largest smile I could manage and spoke.

"Oh, give me a break."

The next day.

As I flipped to the third page of the newspapers, this article caught my eye.
"Caught for Possession of Counterfeit Currency"

The subheading read,

"23-year old gang member first to be arrested in a series of incidents, Kamiyama Police reports."

I believe we started that game yesterday because of some maxim. Both Chitanda and I completely forgot about it as we were so caught up with the game, but now I remember what is was.

That was "A horse comes from a gourd"[23], right?

... Yeah, I think so.

Well, for memory to match the truth, one will need a lot more than pure luck, I suppose.

5 - Sappy New Year

5.1

There's this axiom that goes, "What you do over the new year, you repeat all year." When I was young, during the period when I was busy preparing for my high school entry examinations, I was so afraid of that myth that I took a break from studying on New Year's Day itself. That was quite a long time ago... No, that's not true. It was only last year.

Now, in the darkness, I wondered if the alternate saying "What you do on New Year's Day, you repeat all year" was true. As they say, "The whole year's plans are made on New Year's Day." To befall a disaster early in the very first month of the year. This kind of thing should be a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, and definitely not a yearly event, right? I wouldn't call myself a superstitious person, but if someone said, "Disaster will strike again for the impure", I would probably just go for a purification ritual[24] obediently.

I could sense Chitanda thinking about the question I had just asked her regarding the old saying.

"Well... I don't think that superstitious belief would be true. If it were, then if you didn't do anything on New Year's Day, then you wouldn't do anything all year. That seems too unreasonable."

Accepting that explanation, I heaved a sigh of relief. My worries having disappeared, I felt liberated.

However, although I couldn't see her emotions in this pitch black environment, but I could tell that Chitanda was deadly serious when she added,

"But Oreki-san... I'm more curious about the situation we're in right now, rather than the remaining 364 days ahead of us."

I know.

I understand the serious situation we're in. But Chitanda, couldn't you let me escape reality for a little while more?

The wind blew in through the cracks, so cold that it was as if our cheeks were being cut. At the same time, those small cracks brought in a little light into the darkness. It seems that my eyes have gotten used to the dark.

I could now see a bamboo broom, a metal shovel, a long prole probably used for housekeeping, and a cardboard box of which contents I was unaware of. As well as Chitanda, who was wearing a kimino and a troubled face.

And also, the four walls that surrounded us.

We were currently in the grounds of Arekusu Shrine, which was of prominent scale, even in Kamiyama City. To be precise, we were in a corner of the compound which received hardly any light from the lanterns outside and was not easily spotted by people. There was a dilapidated outhouse there, and we were in it.

The problem was not the place being an outhouse or that it was run-down.

A single door[25] was the only exit and entrance of this outhouse. But right now, it was closed, and locked with a bar... from the outside.

On the night of the first of January, Chitanda and I were trapped in an outhouse in a corner of Arekusu Shrine.

The wall and roof had probably gone past their service life a long time ago, but there was just one spot in the outhouse that was brand new and firm. The door, and only the door was sturdy, being made of shiny aluminum. It's a great thing to have, if you're considering from a theft-prevention perspective. No matter how much we pushed or pulled, it would only shake and clatter a little.

A late grumble escaped from my mouth.

"How did we get in this mess?"

"I wonder. Perhaps..."

Even in the darkness, I felt that Chitanda was smiling.

"It was because you drew a bad fortune?"

I sighed deeply.

Could that really be the reason?

5.2

The incident began when Chitanda gave me a call on some day close to New Year's Eve.

"Oreki-san, do you have any plans for New Year's Day?"

I thought for a while.

When I was an elementary school student, I used to go for a shrine visit every New Year, as my sister like these kinds of annual events. She could have gone by herself, but she always had to drag me along. I was fine with accompanying her to the nearby Hachiman Shrine, but it was terrible when my sister was taking her university entrance examinations. I was ordered to pray for her to pass her exams, and she brought me on a long, arduous journey to Tenmangu Shrine that took us a few hours. As I recall, while my sister asked me to pray for her, she didn't buy a single amulet for herself, and instead amused herself with a game where she would continuously draw fortunes until she obtained a "Great Blessing"[26].

When my sister went to university, she started flying off to a remarkably larger range of places, and thanks to that, she stopped bringing me along, and the need for me to attend annual events disappeared. If I don't have to do it, don't do it. I have have to do it, make it quick. Therefore, I had no plans at all for New Year's Day.

"Nope, not really."

Chitanda's voice became more cheerful.

"I see. Then would you like to visit a shrine with me?"

"...It wouldn't be Tenmangu, would it?"

"Eh? You want to go to Tenmangu Shrine? That's pretty far away."

Yes, quite.

Did I just get mistaken for a Kanke[27] fan? Chitanda lowered her voice, as if she was trying to wait and see how things would go.

"If you're fine with it, would you like to go to Arekusu Shrine?"

Arekusu Shrine isn't far away at all. If it's not snowing, it would only take a few minutes to cycle there. But I wasn't really interested in going there. Arekusu Shrine is the largest shrine in Kamiyama City, so it would be really chaotic during the New Year. I would be betraying my energy-conserving principle if I tried to squeeze into a large crowd in such cold weather. I passed the telephone receiver to my other hand.

"Is there something there?"

"It's not exactly something, but..."

Chitanda said, as her voice became more lively.

"Mayaka-san is working part-time there."

Ibara? I tried to imagine Ibara working in front of the confusing crowd of people at Arekusu Shrine on New Year's Day.

" ....."

"Ah, you laughed."

Yes, I did. Working part-time at a shrine during the New Year would mean putting on white clothing and make-up, and Ibara looked inappropriately under-aged for that. I replied,

"I bet she looks bad."

"That's mean, Oreki-san."

While Chitanda was criticizing me, her voice was filled with mirth. If my impoliteness caused Chitanda to laugh, Ibara must have joked about her own appearance earlier.

"Fukube-san will be going too, so I thought you might want to go too."

Satoshi certainly wouldn't want to miss seeing Ibara in that costume.

I see. Making fun of Ibara would be fun in itself. But it would be in bad taste to visit a shrine simply for that purpose. Well, I suppose it would be fine to go there to pray for peace and good health in the coming year.

"And..."

"Is there something else?"

"It's not really something else in particular, but..."

This time, Chitanda lowered her voice, indicating her bashfulness.

"... I would kind of like to show off my kimono too."

If I were to reject Chitanda's request, I'm positive that the reason would be none other than the cold weather. Obviously, it is cold in winter, and while I could endure it, I wouldn't want to pay for my sins later on.

But then again, the new year is the most suitable day for a change of heart. The Japan Archipelago was currently being surrounded by a powerful cold front, so after sunset, Kamiyama City would become atrociously cold.

I put on the white trench coat that I usually wear, settled for a beige muffler and gloves, then slipped a heater pack in my pocket. Even so, my teeth wouldn't stop chattering. Thinking that it was because of my unprotected feet, I chose a pair of laceless boots that looked like they were made of leather. I glanced at the television while going out, and noticed that today's temperature was apparently the lowest recorded this winter. I did not see a single cloud when I looked up at the sky, but the stars were scattered so crisply that I go a little annoyed. This serene atmosphere only helped to foster the coldness I was feeling psychologically.

I was waiting by the stone archway outside the shrine. Even at this time, Arekusu Shrine was filled with throngs of people, but it was still possible to walk without bumping into others, and joining a crowd would stave off the

cold. Compared to the chilly sky, the road to the shrine, which was lined with blazing lanterns, looked a lot warmer.

The multitudes of people milling around were wearing jumpers and coats and seemed to be withdrawing themselves in order to reduce their exposed areas. Although it was so cold, not one of them had a grim face. There were a few small groups of people who, upon meeting their acquaintances, exchanged new year greetings. But I still couldn't find Chitanda.

Am I too early?

It's certainly not appealing to wait for someone in this temperature, I thought as I checked my watch. At that moment, a black taxi stopped outside the archway. The back door opened, and with a "Thank you very much", a girl got off the taxi. Her kimono was a quiet shade of red that shone like starlight and radiated like a bonfire. She had something like a black coat on top of that kimono, and held a light purple purse in her hand. It was decorated with a golden string, embroidered to look like balls. The girl's hair was tied back in a bun, and she had an ornamental hairpin that was shaking around. Lastly, she had a sho bottle[28] wrapped in some white paper, probably a gift to the shrine.

As expected of New Year's Day, people are wearing such flowery stuff.

As I had that thought, the person turned out to be Chitanda.

I didn't think she would arrive by taxi. So taxi services still run on New Year's Day, huh. While holding that worthless thought, I looked at Chitanda, who turned to look at me with a smile.

"Did I make you wait?"

"No..."

"Happy new year."

"Ha-happy new year."

"I hope we can get along as well in the coming year."

"As do I. Please overlook my flaws."

That was bad. Having suffered a psychological attack, I could do nothing but give a stupid reply. Chitanda must have overlooked my hesitation, for she slightly raised her arms and lightly waved her sleeves.

"I'm here to show off!"

The kimono was based around the color red, so it would probably fit in the "elegant" category, and yet it did not shine glaringly at all. It was certainly a bright piece of clothing suitable for the New Year, though I find it strange that it doesn't seem too heavy on the eyes when Chitanda is wearing it. The kimono was flowery, but at the same time, mellow. In the past, whenever my sister put on a kimono, all I could think was, "What's with this tomboy?"

Since Chitanda was wearing a black coat, I could only see the front design of her kimono. It was of butterflies flying on a red background, with an embroidery of a flowing river near the hem. Or is that supposed to represent the wind?

I was unable to give a comment, but it seemed that Chitanda was satisfied with just showing off. She didn't even seem to be waiting for any reaction from me. With her left hand holding her bag and her right hand holding the bottle, Chitanda looked at the road to the shrine.

"Shall we go, then?"

Chitanda's clogs made a clacking sound as we walked towards the shrine. As I looked at her back, I thought that I should have at least said "You look good in it" or something like that.

We walked on, the clack-clack sound blending with the slight commotion around us.

As expected, the cold wind wasn't so bad when we were surrounded by the crowd. The stone paving stretched out ahead of us as the lanterns' light caused human silhouettes to appear under the night sky. I suddenly realized that the bottle Chitanda was holding seemed to be really heavy. It's dangerous to have both hands occupied in a congested area. When I told

Chitanda that I would carry it for her, she had no reservations.

"Thank you very much. Please."

"What's this?"

"A bottle of sake."

I guessed as much. There wasn't a chance that it would be soy sauce.

"Our family is friends with the shrine caretakers. I'm here to pay them a New Year's visit."

"Running errands so early in the new year? Sounds tough."

"I was even busier during the day. I spent the whole time putting on my best behavior while my relatives came to visit."

An image of Chitanda putting on her best behavior surfaced at the back of my mind. She was dressed gaudily, had her face powdered, lipstick applied, and was sitting properly by the side of the seat of honor, not moving an inch.

I'm not sure if that would be considered to be good behavior, but I knew that the Chitanda family was a considerably large and old one, and I'm not just talking about their estate. The person next to me was an only child of the Chitanda family, so she sometimes has to socialize at a level I could never hope to understand.

I just thought of something strange. Why would a shrine visit be designated to be at night, when it's so cold? I was certain that it was due to Ibara getting the night shift, but it seems that the errand of the Chitanda family's only daughter was also a factor.

"I only had a small piece of mochi, so I'm feeling a little hungry right now."

Chitanda said as she put her hand on her stomach. There was a refined, light purple obi[29] there, probably to match the color of her purse.

"What did you do?"

"I experienced the life of a hermit crab."

"Eh?"

It was really cold today.

It was simply way too cold in the morning, so I couldn't help but decide to learn to live like a hermit crab.

In other words, only my head was out of the kotatsu[30], and I passed the time while becoming inseparable friends with a bowl of tangerines. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I was living like a snail. My father was visiting someone for work, and my sister had left the house for some unknown reason, so I was able to conduct my biological studies to my heart's content.

I passed the time by reading a novel, eating some New Year snacks whenever I got hungry, and sorting out New Year cards when I felt like it. Before I knew it, the clock struck noon and it became the afternoon of the first of January. I turned on the television and carefreely watched this "New Year Drama Special - The Winds of Change: Odani Castle" until the day ended.

Looking back, I felt quite ashamed of myself for sharing about my laziness from the first day of the year. I didn't really want to touch this subject any more, so I changed the subject somewhat unreasonably.

"What's Satoshi doing?"

Chitanda didn't seem to mind the sudden shift in topic at all.

"Mayaka-san is probably giving Fukube-san a call right now."

Besides Classics Club-related work, Ibara calls Satoshi for many other purposes. You could say that it's because she likes talking to Satoshi, but there's a more practical factor at work. Basically, it's because Satoshi and Ibara carry mobile phones, while Chitanda and I don't[31]. I've been thinking that I should get one soon, but since I don't have the dough, it's impossible for the time being.

The road finally approached a steep flight of stone steps. Thankfully, this wide flight of steps had metal railings on both sides as well as the center. But when I looked, there wasn't a single old person using the railing to ascend or descend the flight of steps.

The lamps that were on the pathway to provide some flickering light were absent from the stone steps. Instead, there were white flags with the words "Arekusu Shrine" placed at intervals by the side of the steps. I could see traces of snow here and there on the slope beyond the flags.

"Be careful Oreki-san, it's slippery here."

Chitanda spoke as she went on ahead.

Right after reaching the top of the stone steps, we passed through another archway. Arekusu Shrine was huge, and had a few times the commotion at the pathway. I suppose it was too much to hope that it would be filled with a calm atmosphere, what with everyone celebrating the coming of the new year.

There was a large bonfire in the center of the grounds, and I could only see the shadows of the people who had formed a ring around it. It would be natural to yearn for fire under this cold sky, but perhaps the bonfire was too strong, for most people had their backs towards it. The only people who extended both hands to the flame were kids who were noisily frolicking around. I also noticed a few hands holding onto paper cups. Seems like someone's giving out hot drinks somewhere around here.

On the right was the shrine office, which had been converted into a shop selling charms, amulets and the like. It seems that the peak hour of the shop has passed. While there were many people there, the scene wasn't one of chaos. Ibara's probably there. When I looked away from the shrine office, I noticed a small, red archway in an inconspicuous location. Seems like there's a shrine for Inari[32] here too. In contrast to the white flags all over the place, there was only one red flag with the words "Number One"[33] placed in front of the red archway. There was also a small outhouse at the back. For a shrine that was built discreetly, there were quite a lot of people praying there, perhaps because businesspeople also came here to pay homage to Inari.

The sho bottle was starting to feel heavy in my hands.

"Do I put this down somewhere?"

I held the bottle up slightly. Chitanda shook her head, thought for a while and spoke.

"Shall we say our prayers first?"

To get to the main hall, we had to go up another flight of stone steps. Thankfully, it was a small and had a more gradual incline. It was only about ten steps, but the top half was congested with worshipers. Chitanda and I queued up behind them.

We went up one step every one or two minutes. There was a horizontal line at the front, and people there would drop their monetary offerings, clasp their hands and walk off. It was only when the whole line had dissolved could the next batch of people walk up for their prayers. It certainly looks like they are praying from the perspective of humans, but to the gods, wouldn't it look like requests are being conveyed in conveyor-belt style? The standard prayers like "I hope I will live in good health" or "I wish for world peace" aren't so bad, but those complicated prayers like "I wish Grandpa would recover from his illness, but it doesn't have to be immediate. Also, I wish my children will do well in their examinations. Specifically, I would like them to give up on private education and be accepted in a public school" would take a herculean effort for the gods to even understand.

While I was on this ridiculous train of thought, it became our turn. I threw five yen into the monetary offering box, which had a unusually large white cloth. Hmm, I guess this wish should be fine.

May this year be easy on my energy reserves.

With that, the main event of the shrine visit was over. Now all we had to do was put down the sake bottle, tease Ibara and head back home. Well, it's

cold. As I was thinking of throwing myself into the crowd of people purchasing amulets, Chitanda rolled up the sleeves of her coat.

"Where are you going?"

"Aren't we going to see Ibara?"

"Yes. I'll be entering the shrine office to greet the priest. We can meet Mayaka-san from inside."

There were a few red-faced men gathered outside the shrine office. There were men in their forties, and the oldest was seventy to eighty years old. They were probably shrine parishioners who had come to help out. Chitanda cut through them without a hint of bashfulness and opened the lattice door, while I shrunk myself and followed Chitanda. I also thought that I looked pathetic, but then again, I hadn't socialized with adults before.

"Excuse me!"

Chitanda shouted to the back of the room, but no one appeared. They were probably busy. Chitanda shouted two or three more times, and a white-haired man finally arrived. This man was also red in the face and looked somewhat offended. With a throaty voice, he asked,

"What is it?"
Chitanda gently bowed.

"Happy new year. I'm Eru, here on behalf of Chitanda Tetsugo, who offers his wishes to you for a happy new year."

Contrary to his sullen appearance, the man smiled.

"Ah, Chitanda-san's daughter! Please come in. I'll call the caretakers."

"Thank you for your hospitality."

I'm Oreki, tagging along. Sorry for intruding.

The man led us to a huge hall, which was the size of tens of tatami mats. It

was surrounded by sliding doors, and the ceiling was quite low, in contrast to its large area. There were many daruma stoves[34] in the room, and I could see the red flames from their small windows. Also, there were tens of low tables arranged for men and women to sit as they please and peck at their food or drink sake. Bursts of laughter continuously rang out, giving the room a warm feeling.

"Shall we wait in that corner?"

"Yeah, fine."

It was probably too early for the banquet, since there were quite a few empty seats. Chitanda and I headed to a table in the corner. Before sitting down, Chitanda removed the black coat that was above her kimono. I thought it was just a coat, but seeing it under the bright glow of the electric light, it seemed like the cloth had a somehow twisted texture, and the design was shaded off. Chitanda noticed me scrutinizing her coat.

"Is anything the matter?"

"No, I was just thinking that your coat has a very unique texture."

Chitanda smiled.

"Thank you. It's made of crêpe[35]."
The story of Mito Koumon[36] flitted past the back of my mind.

I also took off my trench coat. Mine was a cheap coat, so I didn't care how it was handled, but Chitanda removed a hanger from the lintel and hung up her coat.

Before long, a sliding door opened and a young girl appeared, wearing a white robe and a scarlet hakama[37]. She had long hair that was tied at the back, making her look like a miko[38], but her small spectacles didn't really fit her appearance. That flaw aside, I found it strange that this girl seemed to be used to wearing these clothes. I couldn't imagine her being a part-time worker. That would be my first time seeing a real miko, then.

I know that she's young, but I wonder what's her age. Not even twenty, I

think. On seeing Chitanda, the girl headed straight for us. Soon afterwards, the miko in the scarlet hakama and Chitanda, who was in a red kimono, were sitting properly facing each other. Only now did I notice that Chitanda's sleeves were also decorated with beautiful flying butterflies.

Chitanda's head bowed first.

"Happy new year. May this year be even better than the last."

The miko replied politely.

"Happy new year."

"My father sends this bottle of sake. I hope you accept it."

Ah, it's this. I held out the sho bottle. The miko bowed while pressing three fingers of each hand on the floor.

"Thank you very much. We accept."

"No, it's just a trifle."

As I ran my mouth without thinking, Chitanda couldn't help but giggle.
"Oreki-san, I'm supposed to say that."

Yeah, I just realized that there's no reason for me, who was only holding it because it was heavy, to be humble over the Chitanda family's gift. Crap, I was caught up in the unfamiliar atmosphere and said something stupid.

As I became disconcerted, the miko spoke.

"We don't accept mere trifles."

Chitanda replied with a mirthful voice.

"Come now, please accept it anyway... Trifling as though it may be."

I finally noticed that the miko's lips were curved slightly upwards. It seems that Chitanda and this miko are acquaintances who are close enough to joke around with each other. Come to think of it, all those polite greetings were

probably all a joke too. I worried so much for nothing.

The miko asked.

"You're from Class B, right?"

I was indeed from Class 1-B in Kamiyama High School.

"Yes."

How does she know my class? I was starting to suspect something, when she asked her second question.

"Is Fukube-kun not with you?"

She even knows Satoshi! Is this the power of Shinto? The shrine maidens of Arekusu Shrine must have the power to see others' pasts! She must even know that I spent the whole day lazing around!

It seems that my inner unrest was shown clearly on my face. Chitanda whispered into my ear,
"That's Juumonji Kaho-san."

Who?

"She's from Class 1-D."

I looked at the miko in front of me again.

She had a calm bearing, and was taller than average, so I didn't think that it was impossible. I certainly thought that she was below twenty, but...

"We're in the same year?"

I shrieked hysterically without thinking.

Chitanda and Juumonji Kaho laughed out loud.

If she's in Class B, she would be in the same class as Satoshi. Naturally, she would know him.

The two clad in traditional Japanese clothing exchanged words closely. But Juumonji was in the middle of some work. She got up, as if realizing something.

"Well, I'll see you next time."

Juumonji said while exiting the room. Chitanda called out to her retreating figure,

"We would like to see Ibara Mayaka-san. Is that alright?"

"Ibara... Oh, her? Hmm, I guess it should be fine. You can go through this passage to the back of the shop and check on her."

I was a little shocked to hear someone involved with the shrine actually call it a "shop". Should that really be called that? Not that I was holding some sort of romantic expectations, but... Chitanda and I stood up, and opened the sliding doors, as directed by Juumonji.

When we entered the corridor, a slight commotion reached our ears, so we immediately knew where the shop was. Chitanda, who was wearing a tabi[39], smoothly shuffled her feet and advanced down the corridor. My feet, on the other hand, were unbearably frozen by the coldness of the floorboards.

We gently opened the wooden sliding door at the end of the corridor.

Curse-breaking arrows, bamboo rakes, darumas and amulets. Those were some of the items on display at the shop. There was a total of three people dressed up as shrine maidens at the counter to deal with the customers. But are that many people really necessary for this period of time? I think two would be sufficient. Chitanda had bent her knees, leant inwards and was about to thrust her head through the doorway to search for Ibara, but she didn't get a chance. When we opened the door, we immediately knew that the one closest to us and obviously more free than the others was undoubtedly Ibara. Like Juumonji, she was wearing a white robe, a scarlet

hakama and had her hair tied up at the back.

Wait a minute, that's strange. Ibara doesn't have long hair. That must mean that it's a wig, then. Would I have thought the same if Ibara had actually grown her hair and tied it up?

"Mayaka-san."

Chitanda smiled. Ibara abruptly turned around, smiled as she saw Chitanda, but scowled as she met my eyes. In front of the customers, Ibara didn't raise her voice. Instead, she moved her reddened lips slightly and warned in a low voice,

"Don't look."

What a mean thing to say at the start of the year. Why would you take up this part-time job if you don't want to be seen wearing the costume?

"Happy new year."

Ibara nodded in response to Chitanda's whisper. She then scanned her surroundings, and seeing that there were no customers, leaned only her upper body towards the door.

"Happy new year. That kimono is so nice! You look beautiful!"

"Thank you very much."

"Is it a formal kimono?"

"No, it's a common one. I'm keeping my formal kimono for college."

Common? Is that the "common" from "common sense"? That means it's for general use, right? Has the English language taken over the world of kimonos too?

"My shift ends in an hour. What are you going to do?"

"I think I will be a guest in the main hall. What about Fukube-san?"

"He came in the day. But he went home to watch some drama, 'New Year

Drama Special - The Winds of Change: Odani Castle', I think it was called? I think he'll be back soon."

While they were talking, there wasn't a single customer going up to Ibara. Come to think of it, there were no goods displayed in front of Ibara's seat. I asked,

"What are you selling?"

"Fortunes. I'm also in charge of lost kids, lost and found, and breaking change."

The fortunes could be drawn by the customers themselves. All they had to do was place a hundred-yen coin on the offering stand covered with paper, and it seemed that the rest was self-service.

Ibara must have followed my train of thought, for she insisted forcefully,

"I was busy in the day."

It seems that she's admitting that she's free now.

Ibara certainly wasn't lying when she said she was busy in the day. There was a tray next to her filled with items like phones, wallets, keys and foldable umbrellas.

"The shrine parishioners patrol the area, and if they see anything that might be valuable on the ground, they bring it here. There were also many lost children. That's why I was busy in the day."

Even if you didn't emphasize it, I wouldn't think that you're slacking on your job. Not in the slightest.

Changing the subject, Chitanda spoke.

"A fortune sounds like fun! May I draw one?"

Chitanda, who had been leaning over, stood up. As she turned back, Ibara called out.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Going around to the front..."

"It's alright, you can draw it here."

Having gotten permission from the salesperson, Chitanda retrieved her wallet from her purse, and took out a 100-yen coin. The wallet looked like it was made of leather, so it was probably expensive. Ibara, however, had laid eyes on Chitanda's purse.

"Ah! That purse is really nice too! It looks so elegant!"

"Ufufu."

Having received praise for her personal effects, Chitanda smiled joyfully. I found that to be surprising.

Chitanda seemed to have a different set of values from that of other girls her age, so I felt that it wasn't like her to show honest feminine reactions like "feeling happy after her bag was admired". Of course, those were just my arbitrary thoughts. Thinking that I can deduce everything about someone with the little information I have about them would be committing the sin of pride. I should turn over a new leaf this year.

Indifferent to the extremely unreliable decision that I just made, Ibara was deep in thought about something. She muttered,

"Yeah, I suppose purses would normally be like this..."

Well, the linen drawstring bag that Satoshi always carries around definitely wouldn't be considered elegant.

It's my first shrine visit in such a long time. It can't hurt to draw just one fortune. I took out a 100-yen coin, and dropped it into Ibara's hand after Chitanda. Ibara placed the two coins on the offering stand, and held out the hexagonal cylinder towards us.

"Here you go... May the gods' divine protection be with you."

That seems a little wrong, I think.

Chitanda was the first to draw a fortune. She opened the starched paper tensely. Before I had even opened mine, Chitanda shouted excitedly,

"Wow! It's a 'Great Blessing'!"

That's auspicious, but she should probably wait for me to check that there's nothing bad written on my fortune before rejoicing about hers. I opened my fortune.

" ....."

"What's wrong, Oreki-san?"
"Nothing. Looks like this is going to be a great year."

The sleeve of Ibara's white robe fluttered as she pointed at me.

"You've drawn a 'Future Blessing'[40], right?"

Is that really shown on my face? I sighed and showed my fortune to the two girls.

The ear of grain that reaches the heavens
Is pecked at by the birds
And shows signs of being bent by the wind.
Good fortune does not reach the body.

And in large text,

MISFORTUNE

5.3

It is rare to draw a "Misfortune". It is auspicious to get something rare. Ergo, drawing a "Misfortune" is actually a sign of good luck.

The conclusion that can be drawn from that perfectly sound Modus Ponens[41] is that this bodes well for the new year. We returned to the guest hall, leaving behind Ibara, who was looking at me like I was an abandoned puppy.

Chitanda, on the other hand, was beside herself with joy.

"What would a 'Misfortune' be like? I'm curious!"

Chitanda exclaimed as she grabbed my fortune and stared at it intently. Her first subject of curiosity in the year was actually about the text on a bad fortune I drew. I couldn't help but respond to that excessive innocence.

"Are you that happy about my misfortune?"
Chitanda tilted her head in puzzlement, as if she had no idea what I was talking about.

"Didn't you mention earlier that you don't believe in these kinds of things?"

Yeah, I did, I think.

If I had to choose between believing and not believing in superstitions, I would have to say that I don't believe in them. But it would be a lie to say that I have never been drawn into believing in certain things, thanks to some rare cases. As I was thinking deeply about this, Chitanda's face suddenly drew near, denying my chance to reply to her question.

"Wh-What is it?"

"I am sorry."

Her head abruptly bowed down.

"That was just a show of courage, right? You're actually quite worried about

it."

I couldn't think of any words to say regarding that statement.

"Just give it back."

A person swiftly walked past my field of vision as I reached out to retrieve my fortune. Juumonji was going down the corridor with quick steps and a tense face. Chitanda held out thte fortune.

"Ah, of course. Thank you for letting me see it... But, what should we do about it?"

"Nothing at all."

It can't be helped. The only thing that can be done is to dispose of it somewhere in the shrine, but I would feel so awkward doing so. I could just tie it on a sakaki[42], I suppose. Juumonji walked by again. She could probably tell us a suitable method to deal with it.
" ....."

I thought that she had left, but she returned again. Unable to let her walking around pass unnoticed, Chitanda called out.

"Kaho-san."

Juumonji did have some errands to do, but it didn't seem like she was so busy that she had to fight for every second. She stopped when she was called, dropped her firm expression and put on an apologetic one.

"I'm sorry, Eru. I didn't bring you any tea.. "

'No, that's alright. Did something happen?"

Juumonji's lips slightly slackened. I had already learned that that was her way of smiling. In these circumstances, it would be a wry smile, I suppose.

"Well, sort of. One of our part-timers tipped a pot. We're currently remaking all the dumpling soup and sweet sake for the guests."

"I see."

Chitanda's eyes widened.

"Did they get burned?"

"No, they're fine. They escaped with an amazing backstep."

With such strong reflexes, how did they tip the pot in the first place?

Although there were somewhat less shrine visitors at night compared to the day, there were still quite many of them. Sweet sake was definitely still needed. Furthermore, the pot was tipped when the banquet was about to begin, which explains why Juumonji had to run around the guest hall.

Chitanda did not hesitate at all.

"I'll help."

She was about to stand up, but Juumonji stopped her. Was it impossible for Chitanda to help?

"No, you don't need to."

"Why is that? I think my cooking should be fine..."

"I know that you can cook, but do you plan on going into a kitchen wearing that?"

Chitanda took a long hard look at her own clothing. It was a kimono that was red all over, an elegant piece with dancing butterflies and flowing wind. As expected, it was impossible to cook while wearing that. It seemed that Chitanda also understood.

"Is there anything else I could do, then?"

Juumonji thought for a moment and swiftly came up with a decision.

"Could you go to the warehouse and get some sake lees? You should see

them on your left when you go in."

"On my left, got it!"

Chitanda immediately stood up and wiped her sleeves. Then to me, she asked,

"I'm sorry, but could you please help me look after my purse?"

No matter how much of an energy-conserver I am, I can't just sit by while Chitanda helped out in her kimono.

"I'll go as well."

"Sorry for your inconvenience, and thanks for helping."

With those parting words, Juumonji left the guest hall with haste. Chitanda held on to her own purse.

After some consideration, I concluded that it was just a small matter. I probably don't need my trench coat for something like this.

At the entrance, Chitanda asked me a question while I was putting on my boots.

"She said that it was in the warehouse, correct?"

"Yeah."

These boots were difficult to put on, as might be expected from something cheap. There was a buckle, but the hole was small, so I could only continuously force my foot in. I succeeded in putting on my left boot, and answered while squeezing my right foot into the boot.

"It's behind the Inari shrine, I believe... Right, my boots are done."

I opened the door. As the freezing wind hit my face head-on, I suddenly regretted agreeing to help out.

Not even a second had passed before I started longing for the daruma stove.

It number of worshipers hadn't changed much. The number of silhouettes surrounding the huge bonfire in the middle of the grounds hadn't decreased, either. There was probably still some sweet sake left, for there were still many people holding paper cups.

"I guess that's it."

I said, pointing at the outhouse. Since Chitanda was wearing wooden clogs, it was probably difficult for her to move quickly, so she followed behind.

As we drew nearer to the outhouse, we could clearly tell that it was really dilapidated, even in the semi-darkness of the night. The wooden walls and ceiling looked totally unstable. It looked like it would collapse if you gave it a good kick, like in a comic. Was the Arekusu Shrine that strict with its finances? Or was is perhaps unnecessary to rebuild an outhouse in a corner of the grounds? Although the red "Number One" flag for the Inari shrine was just nearby, there was a white "Arekusu Shrine" flag in front of the outhouse, leaving an extremely shabby impression. Furthermore, it seems that the flag picket was too short, so the flag couldn't stand stably on its own, and as a result the top of the flag had to be tied to the eaves of the outhouse with a vinyl string. That's seriously run-down.

But there was one part that was shining with a radiance enough to catch one's eye. It was the door, which was made of aluminum and was mostly likely brand-new. It was probably just replaced, the evidence being the fact that the remains of the previous door were still there. It was locked by a wooden bar, of all things. The bar was supposed to be put through the handles of the door, then it would be fixed with a padlock. However, on New Year's Day, with an unspecified large number of people moving around the shrine, the padlock was unlocked. They were probably careless, or perhaps magnanimous. Then again, there's probably nothing worth stealing in that outhouse.

After removing the bar, we opened the door and entered the outhouse.

"I hope there's a light..."

But we couldn't find a switch for an electric lamp. Come to think of it, the outhouse didn't seem like it was connected to any power cables, so it would naturally have no electric lighting.

"She said that it would be on out left upon entering, right?"

But this instruction caused a great deal of bewilderment to the two of us, because the only thing on the left of the entrance was a wall.

"Perhaps she made a mistake, and it's actually on the right?"

"No, I don't think Kaho-san would have made that mistake."

"But it's definitely not on the left."

I turned to look at the right side of the outhouse. We were in a building without light at night. We couldn't see anything in the absolute darkness. However, I said,

"It's not there, I think."

"That must mean..."

"Maybe it's further in?"

I reached out with my hand in the darkness and shuffled forward. It would have been quite dangerous if I hadn't done that, although it would have been much better to wait for my eyes to get accustomed to the dark. I gradually advanced to the inner part of the outhouse, trying to feel for the sake lees, but there was no positive response from my hand.

"I thought it would be an easy job, but it's turning into a pain..."

"Erm, Oreki-san..."

Chitanda, who was suddenly right behind me, called my name. A gust of wind blew the aluminum door shut, causing the light outside to be unable to enter.

"Yeah?"

"I don't know how to say this, but..."

Indeed, it did seem difficult for her to voice it out, as she was holding her purse with both hands and fidgeting restlessly. I continued groping in the darkness, while thinking that it was rare for the usually direct Chitanda to be so hesitant.

"This is an outhouse, right?"

"Right. You could also call it a shack."

"You are searching for the sake lees as requested by Kaho-san, right?"
"What else would I be doing?"

"I'm sorry if I misunderstood, but, erm, this is an outhouse."

I sighed.

"Yes, but what about it?"

In the darkness, Chitanda shook her head and for some reason, spoke in her smallest voice.

"No, the warehouse."

"Huh?"

"It's in the warehouse. That was where Kaho-san told us to get the sake lees. This is an outhouse, but the sake lees are in the warehouse."

By inverting her word order in her second explanation, Chitanda finally gave me a complete picture of what was happening.

I was at a loss for words. I instantly thought of hitting my head and saying, "Oh, man! I got it wrong since I don't have a warehouse at my place!", but I couldn't really say that, so I gave up on putting that idea to action. Instead, I replied quietly,

"You noticed from the beginning, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, but I was not sure of myself. I do know that there is a warehouse behind the shrine office."

"You could have told me earlier..."

It's common for people to hide their embarrassment by finding fault with others. Well, I'll apologize later, but we have to hurry. The sweet sake's running out, and more importantly, it's too cold.

It was at the moment when we changed direction in the darkness.
We could hear a drunk voice outside the shack.

"Hey, the bar's off."

Then, an inauspicious thud sounded.

"Eh? That was..."

Chitanda still didn't realize it. I immediately raced to the door, or rather, since it was too dark to actually tell, the place where the door should stand according to my memory. I felt the cold sensation of the aluminum doorknob.

But then...

The door would only shake and clatter a little. I turned to look back at Chitanda. I could not clearly see her outline, but I imagined her tilting her head worriedly.

"What's wrong?"

She probably couldn't see it, but I shrugged anyway.

"We've been locked in."

5.4

"Hey, Chitanda, would you say that the phrase 'whatever you do on New Year's Day, you repeat all year' is true?"

I asked, and I could sense Chitanda thinking about the question.

"Well... I don't think that superstitious belief would be true. If it were, then if you didn't do anything on New Year's Day, then you wouldn't do anything all year. That seems too unreasonable. But Oreki-san... I'm more curious about the situation we're in right now, rather than the remaining 364 days ahead of us."

The wind blew in through the cracks, so cold that it was as if our cheeks were being cut. At the same time, those small cracks brought in a little light into the darkness. It seems that my eyes have gotten used to the dark.

I could now see a bamboo broom, a metal shovel, a long prole probably used for housekeeping, and a cardboard box of which contents I was unaware of. As well as Chitanda, who was wearing a kimino and a troubled face.

And also, the four walls that surrounded us.

A late grumble escaped from my mouth.

"How did we get in this mess?"

"I wonder. Perhaps..."

Even in the darkness, I felt that Chitanda was smiling.

"It was because you drew a bad fortune?"

I sighed deeply.

Could that really be the reason?

...No, that can't be it. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the old man was drunk, so he locked the door using the bar without checking if there was

anyone inside. I said the other reason, or rather, the root cause of our problem, aloud.

"Sorry. It was all because of my stupid mistake."

Chitanda shook her head.

"It's okay. Neither of us imagined that we would get locked in."

That might be true, but I hadn't apologized for my mistake yet.

We might be locked in, but fortunately, we weren't trapped in a soulless factory or the school premises in the summer. This outhouse is on the edge of the grounds, in a place that is hard to notice, but those praying to Inari shouldn't miss it. If we shout, it should be simple to get someone outside to help us remove the bar.

"I'll try calling for someone. I'm going to shout as loud as I can, so you might want to cover your ears."

I certainly couldn't get Chitanda to shout. I practiced getting my voice out a couple of times.

"Ah, wait."

I was troubled about what I should actually shout. A competent high school student wouldn't go "Helllp meeee!", right? "Heey!" would be good enough, I suppose. Anyway, I just need to shout loud enough to get someone to come over and help. I took a deep breath and was just about to yell, when...

"I said, please wait!"

A white thing suddenly reached out in the darkness, and then a soft object covered my mouth. Startled, I swallowed my words, focused my eyes to my front and saw that Chitanda was using her palm to cover my mouth.

Surprised, I darted my eyes about, while Chitanda leaned over and used her left hand to roll up her right sleeve, with her right hand still firmly on my mouth.

"I'm sorry, but please wait."

There was an unusual graveness in her tone, causing me to nod unconsciously. However, what was the basis for asking me to wait? Removing her hand from my mouth, Chitanda asked,

"If you yell right now, what do you think will happen?"

Although I didn't know what was going on, I answered anyway.

"Someone would come over here?"

"And we would ask them to take the bar off the door."

"Yeah, and they'll probably help us."

"And they can open the door."

"Yeah, they can."

"And how will they interpret this situation?"

I couldn't reply immediately.

I finally realized what Chitanda was so afraid of. If I had been trapped together, with Satoshi, or if Chitanda had been locked in with Ibara, there would be no problem. However, that was not the case.

Would the kind person who removes the bar from the door understand our situation, given that the two of us are in an unnoticeable outhouse at the corner of the grounds in the middle of the night?

After a brief moment of silence, Chitanda spoke in a voice so soft that it was difficult to catch.

"It would be absolutely fine if our rescuers were people who do not know me at all. However, the parishioners patrolling the area know me well."

I recalled an old man's reaction upon hearing Chitanda's name at the shrine

office.

"If we are rescued by one of them... they would definitely get the wrong idea. Moreover, the sake lees are in the warehouse, not the outhouse, so we do not have room for explanation. Oreki-san, I'm here today representing my father. It would be a different story if it were another time and place, but it would be troubling if rumors of me being seen with you in an outhouse in Arekusu Shrine on New Year's Day spread..."

I groaned.

Just by listening to her explanation, one would think that she cares too much about her reputation. Or that she would like others to think that she's such a person. But I would think that way only because I'm Oreki Houtarou, merely a plain high school student.

On the other hand, Chitanda belonged to a different world. She's acquainted with the son of the Tougaito clan, who have a great degree of influence in educational administration, as well as the daughter of the Irisu clan, which runs the largest hospital in Kamiyama City. They not only have a senior-junior relationship in school, but are also quite good friends. Furthermore, Chitanda is representing her father on New Year's Day in giving a bottle a sake to the Juumonji clan, which runs the Arekusu shrine.

That's a world that I'll never understand. I don't know if Chitanda's worry, that raising our voices now would lead to rumors, is a valid concern or a needless anxiety.

For a short moment, I felt that it must be quite lonely to be in that world.

I let out a short sigh.

"Fine, but what should we do?"

While there were many cracks here and there on the walls, there were none at all at the door, so it would be impossible to unhinge the bar from the inside.

"In any case, we have to get help from outside, and as soon as possible. If someone really needs something from here and opens the door, they would

definitely get the wrong idea. Come to think of it, who would understand our situation?"

"Only Kaho-san..."

"...and Ibara, I suppose."

"Now that I think about it, we should have shouted immediately when the bar was placed on the door, but it was so sudden that I could not react in time..."

Chitanda's downhearted voice suddenly turned bright with hope.

"But that's alright!"

"Oh, you thought of a good idea?"

"Yes!"

She was awfully confident of herself. Did she really have such an eye-opening solution?

I could imagine her smiling in the darkness.

"It's simple. We just have to give them a call."

Well, that wasn't really a jaw-dropping proposal...

"It's certainly simple, Chitanda, but I don't think there would be any public phones in a place like this."

"What are you talking about? Are you joking? Of course, we use a mobile phone."

My head hurts. The wind from the cracks was penetrating my bones.

"I see. It's a good idea. Please go ahead."

"Ah, but I don't bring a mobile phone around."

Are you serious? You're just confused about this situation and forgot that you do have one, right? Right? I spoke in a subdued voice.

"Me neither."

And the, silence fell once again.

"Oh no! What do we do?"

It's a little late to be foaming at the mouth only now.

Besides shouting for help, would there be other ways to escape from this outhouse? I tried thinking for a while.

Is there a way to remove the bar from the inside? I should think this through seriously, without immediately dismissing it as impossible.

First, to consider the structure of the closed door. This door has no key, so if you push it hard enough, it would open a bit. However, it would open only up to the bar.

In the short moment I had to observe while entering the outhouse, I noticed that there were metal fixtures shaped like the character ㄱ installed on the door and walls. Obviously, I don't know the details of these fixtures, like whether they were installed using nails or screws, but it can be assumed that they were fixed well and will not fall off even if we knock on them. Also, there is a wooden pole through these fixtures. That would be the bar.

This means that thee bar slides horizontally through the fixtures. If the bar fits vertically or in some weird position, we could probably be able to force a gap in the door somehow, then use that gap to lift up the bar. But it would be impossible for a bar that fits horizontally.

In conclusion, it is impossible to remove the bar from the inside.

However...

"There's more than one way to open the door."

Upon hearing my mutterings, Chitanda reacted with an "Eh?" I waved my hand at the door.

"For example, we could take the entire door off its hinges. Depending on how it was installed."

In the darkness, I focused on the point where door met wall. There were two hinges, one near the top and one near the bottom. Well, that's how a door is usually fixed.

The problem with these hinges is that to remove them, we would need a screwdriver to loosen the screws, and on top of that, the door has to be open for that to be done. With the door closed, the screw heads are blocked by the edge of the door.

The plan to remove the hinges is also impossible.

"Besides that..."

"Erm, Oreki-san..."

Chitanda whispered in a bitter voice.

"Hmm?"

"I forgot that you don't carry a mobile phone, which is why I asked you not to yell... But now the situation's changed. We should just call for someone. At this rate, you'll..."

What will happen to me? Chitanda was being really unclear.

"You'll catch a cold!"

Indeed, my entire body was shivering from the cold. I had assumed that retrieving sake lees would be an easy job that wouldn't even take a minute, so I didn't wear my trench coat. With only my sweater on, it was painful to be out in this weather, but it's not like I would die from the cold.

"But you're still worried that someone will misunderstand after seeing both of us together, right? If we completely run out of options, I'll resort to

calling for help. Until then, I'll try to think of some other way."

"Oreki-san..."

Chitanda lowered her head. I didn't know if Chitanda could see me in this dark room, but I smiled the biggest smile I could manage.

"Well, it's not that bad. We can't remove the bar or unhinge the door, but there are still four ways to escape that we haven't considered."

"Wow! That many?"

"Yeah."

I started counting with my fingers.

"First, break the door. Second, break the wall. Third, dig a tunnel under the wall. Fourth, make a hole in the ceiling."

Having counted off four fingers, only my little finger was left pointing outwards. Chitanda kept silent, but that silence seemed to say that she was tired of my jokes.

Except that I wasn't joking at all. There's a phrase from a Sherlock Holmes book that I borrowed from Satoshi: "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however unreasonable, must be the correct way." Or something like that[43].

I pushed against the wall with my fist.

"All of these can be done if we try hard enough, I think. The door might be sturdy, but the wall it was fixed on is brittle. If we kick it a few times, the area around the hinges should give way.

"Also, the wooden walls have corroded, so if we use the tools here, we could break through without much effort."

"Wh-What?"

As expected, a voice of restraint rang out.

"These are all no good! No matter how old this outhouse is, it's still part of the shrine!"

"No good huh. I guessed so."

The shrine owners would probably get angry at us. Even if that doesn't cause us that much trouble, if we made too much noise, the parishioners would rush over, and it would defeat the purpose if we're seen escaping. In that case, breaking through the ceiling would also be out of the question. That leaves...

"How about the tunnel-digging operation, then?"

Thankfully, in this outhouse there were shovels that had sharp edges and looked reliable. Furthermore, there were no floorboards on the ground. Ah, that must be the reason for this abnormally cold temperature, because with no flooring, the coldness from the ground is directly transmitted to us.

"...Shall we begin digging?"

"How long would that take..."

I think we should be out by morning. Assuming I don't collapse in the midst of digging.

There's no use changing the direction of the escape plans. This is an outhouse, so it contains a few tools. However, a tool that could possible help us escape has not yet appeared in this present stage. Besides the broom and shovel, there was also a long metal pole used for housekeeping or attaching flags, as well as a platform for a taiko. The cardboard box turned out to contain a large quantity of teacups... What should we do with these?

The wind continued to enter through the cracks in the walls.

In any case, it's probably impossible. There's no way we can get out without opening the door, since this outhouse doesn't have a single window. But as we wait longer, it would become more difficult to come up with an excuse if a third party does come to rescue us. If we wanted to get help by

shouting, we should have done so much earlier. I realize that I keep thinking if I can do anything more to get us out of this situation. Would that be considered willpower? No, I don't have that kind of spirit. It's just that I felt that Chitanda's fears are real, and I just wanted to be considerate to her, I suppose. Ahh, but even so, there's so much space outside!

Yearning for freedom, I took a peep at the outside world through a crack. while it was a small hole, it unexpectedly provided a wide field of vision. My eyes were immediately drawn to the huge bonfire. How nice it would be to be there, where it's so warm! I wonder if there's still any sweet sake left, though. Our failure must have caused some trouble for Juumonji.

The shrine visitors were clearly in a very different mood compared to us. I could see a drunk elderly man approach the outhouse. That would be one of the parishioners, right?

"Ah, he's coming over!"

Only then did I realize that Chitanda was also peering at the outhouse world through a different hole in the wall. The crack I was looking through was around my waist, but Chitanda's was around her eye level. As I was leaning over, my hand was right next to Chitanda's purse.

The elderly man did not come all the way to the outhouse. I thought he was headed this way to go to the Inari shrine, but he crouched to pick up something, then turned around and went back the direction he came from.

"What was that all about?"

I muttered, and Chitanda replied in a voice that lacked confidence.

"He picked up something that looked like a mobile phone strap."

"You could see that?"

"I think so."

"At this distance? And at night?"

Her reply was exceedingly earnest.

"I can see quite well in the dark."

So Chitanda possesses night vision in addition to her 20/20 vision? She not only has excellent eyesight, but she also has sharp hearing and sense of smell. On top of that, she's good at cooking, so she probably has a good sense of taste, too.

I lost sight of the elderly man as we were talking, but Chitanda could still track his whereabouts. She spoke after a short while.

"Ah, he went to hand it in."

"Hand it in? Where?"

"At the shrine office. Ah, there's too many people, I've lost sight of him."

At that moment, a stroke of inspiration flashed in the back of my mind.

"Hey, Chitanda... Is it okay if I break the wall just a little?"

5.5a.

"New Year Drama Special - The Winds of Change: Odani Castle" was really entertaining, with its unprecedented direction. What I found really amazing was the opening scene at the Battle of Okehazama. While other dramas would depict Imagawa Yoshimoto to be a master fencer, he was shown here to be a hero unparalleled in history, and cut down the Oda army even in the rain, beating them hands down. That would make Mouri Shinsuke, the warrior who took Yoshimoto's head, an unparalleled hero as well. When I saw Yoshimoto and Shinsuke clash swords amidst mountains of corpses and rivers of blood in the opening, I was laughing so much that my stomach hurt, and that was when I realized that this drama was actually a comedy[44].

I shouldn't have jumped to that conclusion so quickly, as there were some unexpectedly good parts in the drama. As I hummed the theme song, I idly returned to Arekusu Shrine. I flipped open my phone on a whim and read Mayaka's message again.

"Chii-chan and Oreki have arrived. They're waiting at the shrine office."

Well, she probably shouldn't send a message while doing part-time work.

I swung my bag around as I walked down the path to the shrine. With light steps, I ascended up the stone stairs, and with a sidelong glance at the crowd of people looking to buy amulets, I entered the shrine office.

I met Juumonji-san as I opened the lattice door. Of course, she was in her miko costume. Compared to her, Mayaka was unable to hide the pretension in her costume.

I guess I was lucky to immediately bump into an acquaintance, but I'm not that good with Juumonji-san. I started off with my usual lively greeting.

"Ah, Juumonji-san. Happy new year!"

Contrary to my expectations, she followed up with a question.

"Fukube-san, have you seen Chitanda?"

Chitanda-san? Isn't she here?

"I just got here, so I haven't."

"I see."

Her eyebrows furrowed slightly. Did something happen?

"Sorry I can't take you there right now, but go on inside. There's a stove in the main hall."

With those parting words, Juumonji-san shuffled into a corridor. Well, I have to be thankful that I've been allowed to come in.

I suddenly felt like taking a peek at how Mayaka was doing from the back door. Although this was my first time in the building, I had a general idea of which direction to head in. I don't look like one of those people serving sake, but I put on a face that said, "It's natural for me to be here!" and no one commented about my intrusion.

"It should be around here," I guessed as I slid open the door. Jackpot! Mayaka, clad in her scarlet hakama, was sitting in a proper position, close enough that I could reach out and touch her, and had a slightly tired expression. It must be tough to endure the cold for so long, but it'll be over in thirty minutes.

In the day, the store was bustling with activity, so she couldn't really talk with me, but it looks fine now. I whispered secretively,

"Mayaka."

"Fuku-chan..."

Is it my imagination, or is Mayaka blushing? If it's the latter, I kind of understand the reason. She's still embarrassed about her costume. It would be good if she could get used to it after wearing it for so many hours, but that's not really possible, since Mayaka is still Mayaka this year.

I had already wished her a happy new year in the day, so all I said for now was, "Good work." She was probably tired and didn't have the energy to

even force a smile, so she only nodded in a childlike manner.

But then, probably having just thought of something, Mayaka's actions were filled with vigor once more, and she picked up a handkerchief from the lost-and-found tray.

"Hey, Fuku-chan, do you recognize this?"

It was a laced handkerchief that looked pure white, but actually wasn't. It could be considered to be pearl-colored, I suppose. It also looked expensive. I don't think it would be found anywhere, but it didn't strike me as particular special or impressive, even after being asked if I could recognize it.

"Not really."

I shook my head. Mayaka muttered in a vague voice.

"I think Chii-chan had something like this..."

Come to think of it, it wouldn't be strange for Chitanda-san to use something like this. Of course, she wouldn't bring this to school, though.

I smiled.

"Well, it's good that you have an idea of who the owner is. You can ask Chitanda-san when she returns."

Mayaka forced a weak smile and replied, "Yeah, that's true."

5.5b.

"Help doesn't seem to be coming..."

Chitanda, who was looking through the cracks, murmured. I groaned.

"I thought we were on the right track with the handkerchief, though..."

The wind penetrating the outhouse was growing stronger. As they say, you reap what you sow. I had broken part of the wall with the shovel. Due to that, more wind was blowing in. It's cold. Really cold.

I actually only chipped off a small bit of the wall, and I was only enlarging a pre-existing hole. It was now only large enough for Chitanda to stick her small hand out.

It is impossible for us to escape from this outhouse by ourselves.

I had drawn that conclusion earlier. While it was built in a barely noticeable place, there were still people milling about. It's not possible for us to get out without anyone seeing us if by using proper, acceptable methods. If only this room had just one window. It would then be possible to somehow dislodge the bar and open the door.

If we can't escape by ourselves, the only way was to call for help, but we could only contact Ibara or Juumonji. Both Chitanda and I don't carry mobile phones, but sadly, it doesn't seem that humans, even with their wisdom, will ever get rid of this primitive method of communication in this fast-paced, information-oriented society.

Thankfully, Ibara's part-time job as a miko included being in charge of the lost-and-found. As Ibara mentioned, the parishioners patrol the grounds, pick up anything that looks valuable and deliver the items to her.

In other words, if we drop something of monetary value, it would have a very high chance of making its way to Ibara.

There has been nothing wrong up to this point. The item that we dropped

was picked up by the parishioners and sent to the shrine office, which was all according to the plan.

However, the problem was still not solved. We've established a method to send an item to Ibara, but we have no way of conveying our message for Ibara to help us.

I muttered,

"As expected, we can't do it with just one handkerchief."

We chose to drop Chitanda's handkerchief. It was our first choice as it looked valuable enough to be picked up and delivered by the parishioners, and Ibara would know who it belonged to.

Chitanda distanced herself from the wall.

"Yes, Mayaka has seen that handkerchief many times already, but it's not really something that leaves a strong impression..."

Even if we assume that Ibara knew that the handkerchief was Chitanda's, it would be difficult for her to make the logical leap and deduce that we're trapped in an outhouse. We would have to give Ibara the train of thought:

"This item was picked up near the outhouse. Why would Chitanda Eru be around that area? Wasn't she at the main hall? Ah, this has to be a serious problem!"
So it's impossible to do this with only one handkerchief, huh?

Then it's time for my next move. What would be the perfect object that would tell Ibara about our predicament when she sees it?

5.6a.

The banquet had started in the main hall.

there were many empty seats, and I'm not the type of guy who gets bashful when doing something alone, but since I was bored beyond boredom itself, I immediately pulled out of the hall.

There was no other destination except for Mayaka's place. I didn't want to be a hindrance to the part-timers. I thought about the two people working with Mayaka, but I felt at ease after exchanging some words with them. Apparently, Mayaka had made a declaration to the two of them.

"I'm aiming to go out with that guy," she said.

The three shrine maidens-for-hire must have gained a feeling of solidarity after working with each other for a long time, for the two of them were supporting Ibara vehemently. I wonder where those girls came from. They're not Kamiyama High students, I think.

As soon as I slid open the door, I could see Ibara beckoning me to enter. But if I stepped out of the threshold of the door, I would be in full view of the customers. No matter how few customers there were present now, I couldn't do that. Instead, I stretched my neck as much as I could.

"Fuku-chan, look at this!"

She produced a foldable wallet with two denim surfaces. Ah, I've definitely seen this before.

"Isn't that Houtarou's?"

"Yeah. That idiot must have dropped it."

"Well, Houtarou's a guy with many chinks in his armor."

Houtarou might think that he backs up Chitanda on many things, but that's only one exceptional case in my memory. Houtarou has actually caused Mayaka and Ibara to worry quite a few times already during our normal

club activities. I remember the time when we all went to the hot spring this, I mean last, year thanks to Ibara's connections, Houtarou actually fainted after being in the hot water for only a short time.

Anyway, it would be just like Houtarou to drop his wallet. But if that's the case, I'm starting to doubt that Chitanda is the owner of that handkerchief.

"This is strange. Here, take a look."

Mayaka said as she opened the wallet. It's improper to look into others' wallets! Even so, I concentrated on staring at the wallet. This is...

Mayaka accurately summed up the state of the wallet.

"It's an empty wallet."

There was nothing in the part used for keeping notes, as well as in the part for coins. Not a single yen.

"Isn't that strange? Oreki came here for a shrine visit. He would at least be holding a monetary offering."

"Nah, that's not weird at all. He could have used all his money as an offering."

"Him? Are you serious?"

No, I think that would be unlikely. Then again, he could have had some really intense wish. I pointed at the wallet.

"What's strange is the card slots. Houtarou would usually carry around a point card or membership card, but there's none here."

"Ah, yeah, that's true."

"So this wouldn't be Houtarou's wallet, right?"

But Mayaka strongly rejected that theory.

"No, this is definitely his wallet."

"... Why do you think so?"

"Because this was tied to the wallet at the metal fixture usually used to attach a metal chain."

Mayaka removed a scrap of paper from her purse. It was a small, crumpled piece of paper.

I knew what it was when I received it. It was a fortune.

"Take a look at it."

I unfolded the fortune... and burst into laughter.

"Misfortune! Misfortune! Man, Arekusu Shrine sure is nasty. To think they actually have bad fortunes!"

But Mayaka didn't laugh at the bad fortune. A wry smile surfaced on her lips, but her voice was dead serious.

"That's the fortune that Oreki drew. It also said something like 'Pecked at by birds' or something like that. Oreki dropped his wallet while his bad fortune was tied to it."

I see.

I furrowed my eyebrows. As I had suddenly fallen into silence, Mayaka was worried.

"Fuku-chan?"

"... This means..."

I gulped in awe.

"Because Houtarou tied this inauspicious fortune to his wallet, on top of dropping it, its contents were also removed!"

That's really unfortunate of Houtarou, to suffer hardships so early in the new year.

This is the power of a fortune. It predicted Houtarou's calamity so accurately. I should also make use of this power.

I retrieved a 100-yen coin from my own wallet.

"Mayaka, let me draw a fortune too."

5.6b.

"Help isn't coming, huh... Tchoo!"

Chitanda sneezed.

And I had thought it would be fine since it wouldn't be cold at all. How wrong I was. Being a guy, I've never worn a kimono, but no matter how you look at it, it can't have the best insulation.

"You alright?"

Chitanda gave a troubled smile in response to my mundane question.

"Yes... I should have worn my Michiyuki..."

"Michiyuki?"

"Yes, that black clothing made from crêpe."
Ah, that coat. So it's called a Michiyuki, huh? It did seems very Japanese.

"I also regret not wearing my trench coat."

"It's certainly gotten pretty cold..."

Pretty's a total understatement. To be precise, we're reaching our limits soon. If I didn't have a heater pack in my pocket, I would have definitely given up and shouted for help.

Now, my pocket held various items, besides the heater pack. A 1,000-yen note. Some small change. And a point card for the CD shop.

It had been a momentous decision to throw down my wallet. I had thought that throwing out Chitanda's wallet would have been the better solution. If I tied my bad fortune to Chitanda's wallet, Ibara would understand the situation and would probably judge it to be an emergency.

However, I refrained from using that method. Chitanda's wallet wasn't the one that she normally used when buying bread from the canteen, but was a

part of her New Year costume. I had taken a glance at it while she was paying for a fortune. Chitanda's wallet today was made of real leather and looked expensive.

I thought that it we removed the wallet's contents, it wouldn't be so painful if it were stolen instead of returned, but that was naive of me, as Chitanda's wallet was packed. If anyone besides the patrolling parishioners found the wallet, they would definitely go through its contents. That would be a problem.

Having no other choice, I emptied my wallet, and to show that the wallet belonged to Oreki Houtarou, I tied my bad fortune to the wallet. Since it was a piece of paper, I wanted to write "Help", but unfortunately, no matter how much I wracked my brains, I could neither find any writing equipment, nor think of any substitutes. I did think of scratching out "Help", but the creases from tying it to the wallet would make the word unreadable. I could have inserted the paper inside the wallet, but then Ibara wouldn't be able to tell that it's my wallet just by looking at it. I was at a dilemma as to which option I should take.

In the end, it seems that I chose the wrong on. The wallet undoubtedly got delivered to Ibara, but help still didn't arrive. Ibara should have suspected something after receiving Chitanda's handkerchief, followed by my wallet, but... It hadn't made her think of leaving her post and checking on our situation.

"Sorry, Chitanda. We might not have any other options."

I was somehow in a self-sacrificial mood and felt like giving the freezing Chitanda my clothes to wear, but I was also cold. If I removed this sweater, I would probably get hypothermia or something.

Chitanda returned with a smile.

"No, it's my fault for being selfish and dragging you along with me."

"You're not being selfish. It's your responsibility, right?"

"... That might be true, but that's no excuse for getting you caught up with

this. Let's just call for help. We'll just have to put up with any rumors that spread."

I was filled with chagrin, having to give up after enduring the cold for so long. But we've exhausted all possible means. Since we can't think of anything else, we shouldn't delay pointlessly any more. I nodded.

However, at the very last moment...

"Ah, I imagine Fukube-san is already here, too."

Chitanda's lamentation reminded me of what I had forgotten. Of course! Satoshi's probably here already. He said that he would revisit the shrine at this time, so it would be natural for him to be here.

AT first, I thought of the physical ways to break out of the room. That proved to be too difficult, so I considered trying to contact Ibara. But Ibara wasn't the only person we could contact. There was also Satoshi. Satoshi would understand!

Ah, but we don't have the tools!

"Chitanda, do you have some sort of string?"

Chitanda faltered after receiving my sudden outburst.

"St-string?"

"About this long... Something around 50 cm would do. That will definitely be enough to convey our situation."

Chitanda started feeling around her body to search for a string.

"How about my sandal strap?"

"Too short."

"Ah! There's a drawstring on my purse!"

I shook my head.

"That's no good, since we'll be using your purse."

Unable to understand, Chitanda tilted her head in doubt. Well, I'll save the explanation for later.

"How about your bootlace, then?"

"Ah, right! There's that!"

With a spirited disposition, I looked down at my feet, but was immediately disappointed. If I was wearing normal sneakers, that would work. However, I was wearing laceless boots today. It's not like i was trying to look good. It's just that I was afraid the grounds would be slippery from all the melted snow. Boy, was I seriously unlucky for that decision to bite back at me here.

"If we absolutely must..."

Chitanda gently touched her obi.

"We could use the string on my obi."

"Is it long enough?"

"Yes."

Chitanda nodded, and for some reason, looked away. Not caring about the small details, I spoke.

"Is it difficult to remove?"

"Well, yes, it is. It will take quite a bit of time."

At that moment, a bout of uneasiness passed by.

"Erm, Chitanda, I'm not familiar with kiminos, but..."

"....."

"Will the kimono be fine after you take off the obi string?"

The answer to that question took a long time to arrive. Chitanda cast her

eyes downwards and spoke in a small voice.

"The obi would kind of come off.. "

"Come off? We can't do that then!"

"I guessed so. Since it would be difficult to fix.. "

That's not the problem here. Even if we manage to get help from Satoshi, if he sees Chitanda's kimono in a mess it would be… Let's just say that it wouldn't look good. It would make all that caution we've practiced up to now absolutely pointless.

"Is there any other string here?"

Think.

This outhouse contains a bamboo broom, a metal shovel, a long pole for housekeeping, a platform to support a taiko, a long rod laid out horizontally, as well as a cardboard box, which is filled with a large quantity of teacups, all with the same design. We've reached this situation where we have nothing but the aforementioned items, but what we really need right now is just one string... If we had a blade, we could cut off the linen string fixed at the end of the broom. Would I be able to cut it by swinging the shovel? I don't think so, but it's not long enough anyway.

As if she couldn't take the silence, Chitanda timidly asked,

"Er... Why do you need a string to get Fukube-san to help?"

More importantly, where's the string? I'm about to freeze soon.

5.7a.

Mayaka shrieked hysterically.

"Why!"

A lost object had been delivered yet again. This time, it was a purse. Not the cheap kind that I use, but an elegant purse that a woman in a kimono would carry.

Mayaka was shocked because that purse belonged to Chitanda. Apparently, Chitanda had taken out that purse before I arrived, and Mayaka clearly remembered that it looked like that. A handkerchief, a wallet, and now a purse. The two of them had lost that possessions three times in a row. Is that the consequence of Houtarou's "Misfortune"? Incidentally, I have a "Middle Blessing". I'm a little disappointed, but if I look down the scale, I do feel a sense of superiority.

"This was also picked up near the outhouse. What are those two doing?"

It was light purple in color, was tied with a plaited cord, and was decorated with balls. That's nice. But it's clearly not something a guy would carry, so I shouldn't compare it with mine.

"And there's some dirty string tied around this, too..."

That line caught my attention.

"String?"

"Yeah, look."

Mayaka held up the purse. Indeed, there was a string tied around at the bottom. A purse that was tied at both ends. My eyes widened.

Th-this is...

I suddenly jumped up to my feet from my sitting position, causing Mayaka to look up in surprise.

"Wh-what is it, Fuku-chan?"

"Mayaka, where is the outhouse?"

"It's over there, near the Inari shrine."

"I'll be right back!"

With quick steps, I left the shrine office. As I ran with all my might under the starry night sky, only one thought crossed my mind.

Houtarou, Chitanda-san, I'm coming to help!

5.7b.

"Satoshi would understand. The meaning of a purse that's tied up at its opening and base."

Since I had done what needed to be done, I was free to give Chitanda an explanation. To be precise, I was explaining while being barely conscious after being driven to the wall by the cold.

"Because he knows a lot of trifling things."

Chitanda was also shivering from the cold. But it seems that her physical suffering was being outweighed by her curiosity. She drew closer and urged me to carry on.

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"The purse is a bag. If the opening and base are tied up, it means that the insides are trapped. This implies that we're 'trapped like a rat'."

In the darkness, a white head tilted in puzzlement.

"I...see?"

She clearly doesn't understand yet. I smiled.

"I didn't come up with it. It came from an episode in history. You know the Battle of Anegawa, right?"

Chitanda, with her exceptional grades, was strong when it came to memorizing details from the textbook. She answered smoothly,

"The Battle of Anegawa was fought in the year 1570, between the Oda-Tokugawa coalition and the Azai-Asakura coalition. Oda Nobunaga won that battle."

"It's a famous story from just before that... Do you know the Siege of Kanegazaki?"

Since this didn't appear in the textbook, Chitanda, even with her superior grades, did not know about it. She shook her head.

I then gave a concise explanation.

"When Nobunaga was attacking Asakura, Nobunaga's brother-in-law, Azai, betrayed him. Nobunaga's sister sent a small bag tied at both ends to Nobunaga, who was at the front lines. Upon seeing the bag, Nobunaga realized that his sister was trying to convey the message that he was 'trapped like a rat'. I don't know how much of this actually happened, though."

This explanation made me seem very knowledgeable, but I only knew about this from the manga I borrowed from Satoshi. I read it at the hot spring inn during the summer holidays, I believe. I also watched that same story unfold in the "New Year Drama Special - Winds of Change : Odani Castle" in the afternoon. I did doubt if just one bag would work, and I thought that perhaps putting the effort to write a letter would be better... Anyway, if it doesn't work now, it'll be extremely troubling for us.

Well, it should be fine. In any case, Satoshi would be free, and like us, he would definitely go over to see Ibara. He should understand when he sees the purse. He's the one who lent me the manga, and he also watched the New Year Drama Special earlier. He's the type to be easily influenced by something he sees. If he sees the purse tied at both ends, he'll definitely think back to that historical episode.

"I never knew that such a story existed..."

Finally convinced, Chitanda nodded deeply, as starlight illuminated her profile.

Since the wallet was also picked up and sent to Ibara, I could rely on the patrolling parishioners to deliver the purse as well. If not, I wouldn't have been able to throw the purse out.

But in order to get the message across, we needed a string to tie around the base of the purse. It's impossible to convey the message using the purse alone, no matter how you look at it. However, we couldn't find a suitable

piece of string to use in the outhouse. Without the tools, it would just be an empty theory. And then I realized that I was following a mistaken assumption... The string that we needed to find was not necessarily inside the outhouse.

The walls of this shack are brittle. Using the shovel, I broke off a corner of the wall, while apologizing in my heart. This brought the number of small holes I made to two. Since the hole was just small enough to put a hand through, Chitanda consented tacitly,

After that, I climbed onto the taiko platform. My aim was to get to the area near the ceiling of the outhouse, right under the eaves.

I pushed my hand out of the hole to get the string. A white "Arekusu Shrine" flag was placed near the outhouse, as if cuddling up to it. The flag pole seemed to be too short, so to stabilize the flag, a vinyl string was used to tie it to the eaves of the outhouse. I was aiming for that string. As expected, the solution was waiting outside the outhouse.

This way, I managed to produce the message "trapped like a rat". The rest is up to Satoshi. Well, it should be fine.

The door clattered. And then, a loud voice sounded.

"Houtarou, are you there?"

Chitanda stared at me with widened eyes, as if not being able to believe it. I shrugged and replied,

"Thanks for helping, I was about to freeze to death."

"There's some hot sweet sake waiting for you in the shrine office. Right, I'm opening the door."

Sweet sake, huh. It was the reason we got in this mess, and I don't think I want to see a cup of it right now.

Clatter, clatter, clunk. The aluminum door slowly opened.
Illuminated by the moonlight and the blazing bonfire, Satoshi smiled.

"Yo. Happy new year!"

"Hey. Sappy new year."

Buffeted by the winter wind, Chitanda sneezed.

6 - The Case of the Hand-made Chocolate

6.1

Today, it is common knowledge that there is more than one perspective to any topic. In this age, it is impossible to survive as a middle school student while being unable to consider the opposite viewpoint. But then again, if you take this one step further, that would mean that while we are under the impression that we know the things around us like they were flesh and blood, we just can't say for sure, and that is exceedingly bad for our psychological stability. So instead of pursuing the truth, we go for plan B, which is not looking into the authenticity of things above a certain depth, or in other words, we believe. This way, we can finally shake off the evils of duality and lead a perfectly normal life.

But recognizing everything in one's surroundings yet disregarding all inquiry would be a totally different problem. While believing in something is unavoidable, we should not accept things blindly. This is also common knowledge. To not accept it is unforgivable. While my personal principle does not draw a clear line regarding that belief, I wouldn't look down on people who do.

This was my follow-up to the tongue-tied Satoshi's lame excuses in this crucial moment. We were at a stairway entrance in Kaburaya Middle School after the day's lessons had ended. It was a little late, so there were only a few sparse figures of students. It had already turned dark on the other side of the open glass door, and the cold February wind blew in intermittently. Satoshi turned to look at me as if I had just saved his life, and gave me a thumbs-up.

"Ah, Houtarou, you do understand, right? The phrase 'To not accept it is unforgivable' was really interesting. Because, look, what if it were hand-made cookies? You can't simply buy some cookies over the counter, decorate it with fresh cream or something and say, 'Voila, hand-made cookies!', right? That's why, I basically, um, don't harbor any ill intentions, but..."

It was not every day that you could see something cause Satoshi to be so incoherent. Fukube Satoshi. He's someone I've known since I entered middle school, and our friendship is quite deep. He's short, gives off a weak image, and has a face that does not exude dignity or strength in the slightest, but in reality he's quite a courageous guy... But not this time. The opponent's too strong.

The person who had ambushed and cornered Satoshi was a small female student who could pass as an elementary school student. Her name is Ibara Mayaka. She has been in the same class as me since first grade in elementary school. This is only my opinion, but her appearance has not changed one bit in the nine years I've known her, if you discount the changes in her size. In addition, while we may have strong affinity, we have exchanged close to zero words with each other. Even now, Ibara doesn't listen to my words. With her head cast downwards, her left hand on her waist, and her right hand holding a present wrapped in red wrapping paper, Ibara let out a sigh and spoke in a low voice.

"Basically, you're trying to say this: For something to be called hand-made chocolates, they have to be made from cacao beans. A chocolate plate that is melted in hot water and reshaped is not counted as hand-made chocolate. So my Valentine chocolate is not hand-made. That's what you mean, right?"

It was the 14th of February 2000 AD. Saint Valentine's Day. It's the day when chocolate sales skyrocket, and it is absolutely ordinary for advertisements to be manipulated if there is profit to be earned. In fact, doing it in February is a smart move. I'm sure that many people would like to believe that the last chance to confess one's love is right before the season of farewells[45]. They certainly wouldn't think that this arrangement was planned.

This wasn't Ibara's first time confessing her feelings to Satoshi. In each of her previous attempts, Satoshi simply evaded the subject. But with today being Valentine's Day, that was impossible. Ibara was serious about it. Having been hit by Satoshi's careless words, she was seething with anger.

Her demeanor was still fairly stable, but I wonder what kind of light those downcast eyes were holding. Those were eyes that would even scare off a

fierce god, I thought, but then again, I'm only having these nonchalant thoughts because I'm not involved in this. Satoshi, being the person concerned, took the full brunt of Ibara's stare, but he still managed to give a reply.

"I wouldn't go that far, but..."

"But that's what you wanted to say, right?"

"Well, put simply, yes."

Ibara raised her head, as her rage spewed forth.

"I see! So that's what you're trying to say! I, I took all that trouble... Just for Valentine's Day! Fine! I get it! If that's what you want..."

Without pause, she ripped apart the red wrapping paper in one breath to reveal a heart-shaped chocolate wrapped in cling film. She then tore up the cling film, opened her small mouth as wide as she could, and chomped down on the chocolate, which had gone hard due to the cold February wind. With a crack, the pointed bit at the bottom of the heart was bitten clean off and chewed noisily by Ibara.

"I'll definitely do it, got that?"

Both of us were taken aback by Ibara's unexpected actions. A few male students who just happened to pass by peered at us, probably curious about what was happening, but then soon retreated, knowing full well to let sleeping dogs lie. With the chocolate she had taken great pains to make destroyed, Ibara glared at Satoshi. She now had a scary expression that was neither anger nor sadness, just pure burning combativeness. Ibara thrust the broken heart at Satoshi.

"Remember this, Fuku-chan, I mean, Fukube Satoshi!"

"Wha-What?"

Stunned, Satoshi asked without thinking. Ibara replied with a sonorous declaration.

"Next year! The 14th of February 2001 AD! I'll make a masterpiece that even you'll accept, and cram it right into your face! You better remember it!"

Beginning to cry, Ibara rushed down the corridor. Her retreating figure faded at the staircase and soon disappeared. When I looked back, I saw that Satoshi had an awkward expression on is face, but he shrugged as if that was usual. I asked,

"Is that alright?"

"Perhaps I was a little mean..."

"Wasn't she crying?"

"Mayaka? Nah, she'll be fine."

Satoshi said as he removed his shoes from his locker. I did the same and shrugged, deciding to forget about Ibara. Her caustic words were probably just a channel for her to vent her grief, I thought, but then again, I'm not involved in this matter.

More importantly, Ibara was planning to give Satoshi hand-made chocolate next year, but I wonder if that would really work out. After all, there are only a few days to the high school entrance examinations. Both of them are aiming to get into Kamiyama High School, but if one of them messes up, they'll be separated, and as they say, out of sight, out of mind. However, I also have to prepare for the exams, and I don't have the luxury to worry about them. The cold February wind blew in once again, causing me to shiver uncontrollably.

6.2

... That's what I remembered about what happened last year.

Come to think of it, I was slightly more indifferent about it last year compared to this year. It's most probably because Ibara and I were really estranged at that time, so it couldn't be helped.

All three of us graduated from Kaburaya Middle School and entered Kamiyama High School together without a hitch. Then, for some reason, all of us chose the same club activity. I think of Satoshi as a friend, and Ibara obviously liked Satoshi, but the three of us are fundamentally not a close group of friends who would hang out together. The fact that all of us entered the mysterious, meaningless Classics Club one after another would be, if put poetically, a practical joke of fate; if put prosaically, the end result of a course of events.

Speaking of the club known as the Classics Club, just the three of us would be absolutely inadequate for its activities. In the Geography Lecture Room, which the Classics Club borrows, there are four members. The last one is the most hard to please.

That difficult person raised her voice, breaking my peaceful reminiscing.

"Eh? What did you mean by that? I'm curious!"

I turned back, and the first thing to come into my sight was long, black hair. I couldn't see her face since her back was facing me, but I could still tell what facial expression she was having right now. When she says the usual "I'm curious!", her large eyes, the only part of her that betrayed the impression of a Yamato Nadeshiko [46], would widen even more, and her cheeks would become slightly red. Thanks to her extreme curiosity, the Classics Club has been able to function as a club without boredom over the last year. Since I would actually prefer boredom to work, that troubled me to no end.

Chitanda was having a face-to-face conversation with Ibara in the middle of the classroom. I was flipping through a book nearby, but probably thinking

nothing of me, the two of them were exchanging words at their usual volume. If I hadn't shifted my attention to the matters of the past, I would be directly receiving the contents of their conversation. Not that I wanted to eavesdrop, but I could hear Ibara's reply.

"I mean, chocolate remained as a drink for 4,000 years not because the South American people did not have any ideas, but because they lacked the technical means."

Seems like those two have been conversing about chocolate this whole time. It would be more accurate to say that Ibara was lecturing Chitanda, though. That's probably the reason why I suddenly remembered about Valentine's Day last year. Last year..., yes, about one year has passed since then. It was now February in the year 2001 AD. To conserve electricity, the heaters in school could not be set about 16 degrees, leaving much to be desired. While I must commend their efforts to save energy, I hate being cold.

But as if thrusting aside the cold, Ibara was talking with ever-increasing amounts of enthusiasm.

"After the Spanish conquistadors brought chocolate to Europe, some time was needed for it to spread as a luxury grocery item. That's because after pulverizing cacao beans, all that could be produced was a sticky liquid with more than 50% fat content. In a time when coffee was readily available, they didn't want to drink something like that."

"I cannot tolerate caffeine, so I cannot drink coffee, but..."

After a short pause, Chitanda continued.

"A drink with a 50% fat content does not seem to be good."

Well, it seems like she's tried drinking mayonnaise before.

"It was actually quite bad for digestion."

"But it still spread, right?"

"It became really widespread after people started adding sugar to it. It even

became a drink superior to coffee for the English. Moreover, because of its high caloric content, it was often used for medical purposes. It was quite a high-class beverage at the time."

"It was used as medicine?"

"Yes, as an aphrodisiac."

I could sense Chitanda tilting her head.

"Eh? How do you spell that?"

Ibara was about to answer, but then she stiffened, and the conversation stopped temporarily. I raised my head, which was buried in my book, to take a peek at Ibara's expression, and noticed a distinct flush on her face. She was having a hard time trying to spell the word she had brought up without thinking.

"To hold a meeting[47], then..."

"To hold a meeting, then?"

"Anyway!"

Ibara forcibly changed the subject. I was about to laugh at her disconcerted manner, but somehow managed to stifle it. I know how to spell it, I think.

"For the chocolate drink to be edible, it wasn't enough to simply squeeze the oil out. A method to add an alkali had to be developed in order to neutralize the acidic content and cause the oil to break down."

This technical discussion seems to have piqued Chitanda's curiosity, so Ibara's attempt at changing the subject was a success.

"Alkali? I've never heard of adding that to food... except for Chinese noodles."

Ibara continued in a somewhat relieved manner.

"However, even after doing that, the beans still had a crunchy texture,

causing it to be distasteful, so they had to be crushed even more. Chii-chan, how small do you think the grains are?"

The diameter of chocolate grains? I've never considered it before. The book in my hands suddenly seemed uninteresting, and I started thinking about Ibara's question, but I couldn't imagine how small they would be.

In contrast, Chitanda hummed quietly and answered the question.

"I see. I've only heard this from the people who sell what at home, but the diameter of wheat flour is 40 to 50 micrometers. Are chocolate beans that small?"

But Ibara shook her head as if she prided herself on having this knowledge.

"I've heard that they're actually 20 micrometers in diameter!"

"... That's amazing!"

Is that a figure I should be surprised at? With no means of comparison, I could not understand at all. Is 20 micrometers that different from 50 micrometers?

... Ah, is it because there's a difference of 2.5 times?

Chitanda nodded a few times with eager admiration.

"That sounds like a difficult number for a mortar and pestle."

"Just like how you can't make ice cream without an ice cream machine, it's impossible to make chocolate from cacao beans using household equipment."

"That's a shame. Fukube-san wants chocolate made from cacao beans, right?"

Ibara let out a small sigh upon hearing those words.

"I didn't know last year that chocolate was so difficult to make, but neither did Fuku-chan, so it's fine."

"It's fine, you say..."

As Chitanda gave her reply, a smile appeared on Ibara's face. No, not the refreshing kind. To exaggerate, it would be something like this: "As her throat rumbled, I shuddered, and couldn't stop cold sweat from forming on my back. A dark enthusiasm caused twisted pleasure to spread on her lips." With clenched fists, she looked up at an oblique angle and announced,

"I'm going to make the best hand-made chocolate ever! If Fuku-chan still complains, I'll lock him up and slowly explain all this to him with additional data. If that doesn't work... I'll just shove it into his mouth!"

One shouldn't incur a woman's enmity. If it's wrong to generalize about women, then I would say that I wouldn't want to provoke Ibara's resentment. Her words might be exaggerated, but they can't be treated as a joke. Unfortunately for Satoshi, the little joke that he used to reject the chocolate last year is still hanging over his head, and now it has turned out like this. Well, as they say, you reap what you sow.

As expected, Chitanda had also been pulled in by Ibara's tenacity, and was using her hands to soothe Ibara. She then asked a question to return the conversation to its original track.

"So what are you making? I know many types of candies you could make with chocolate, but..."

Having decided a long time ago, Ibara answered immediately.

"I plan on making one with a heart-shaped mold."

"Eh? But that's..."

"I know that it's quite plain, but last year's was a failure. I'm going to make sure he accepts this time."

Just when they had finally gotten to the main point, Ibara suddenly leaned forward. Chitanda also responded by drawing closer, such that it was as if their foreheads were about to collide.

"So, I want to make the best chocolate. I'll need things from a Western-style confectionery. Chitanda, do you know of any shops that sell that kind of stuff?"

For some reason, Chitanda lowered her voice and answered,

"Let's see... There should be a store that sells ingredients for professionals near the wholesale market. We could try that place."

Ibara also replied in a small voice.

"Could you take me there?"

"Of course. Would this Sunday be fine?"

"It's settled, then... and make sure you keep this a secret from Fuku-chan."

"My lips are sealed."

And thus the two girls shared an unbreakable promise.

I'm fine with it, but I'm a guy, and on top of that I'm also Satoshi's friend... If they deemed me trustworthy enough to refrain from informing Satoshi, I certainly wouldn't feel bad about it, but either way, it seems that I wasn't counted as one of the room's occupants. As I was having this thought, Ibara called out, as if having just noticed my existence.

"Ah, Oreki."

"... Yeah?"

I answered as if I had also jut noticed Ibara. Without minding my tone, Ibara gave a rare gentle smile.

"Make sure you don't say anything either."

"Sure."

"If you do..."

I already agreed not to! So please, stop staring at me with those eyes!

After school the next day. Ibara and Chitanda were holding another discussion about chocolate in the Geography Lecture Room. Not wanting to eavesdrop, I decided to head home.

I exposed the front of my trench coat to the February wind and joined the flow of people going home from school. Come to think of it, last year, when I was still in middle school, I would immediately start my journey home after school, no matter how early the lessons ended. My everyday life was devoid of purpose. I would reach home early, but I wouldn't have anything to do. I tried to think of ways to spend the time after school, but to no avail. Actually, regarding the characteristic of a daily life lacking in purpose, this year was exactly the same as last year.

Following the crowd to the main street, I left the narrow footpath on the bridge and entered the shopping district. The winter sun, which was weak at the best of times, became even more unreliable when it came to evening. Only now did I realize that the figures of my schoolmates had grown sparse. It's probably not because of the cold, but there were simply no people around. Instead, there were only cars driving past continuously.

With a sidelong glance at a dry goods store, a boutique, and a hairdressers', I proceeded along the tiled walkway. The sound of the flowing wind was mixed with the sound of electronics. I had gotten to the game center next to the hairdressers'. I was just walking past when I suddenly realized something. Out of all the bicycles lined up outside the shop, I recognized one of them. There was no doubt that this mountain bike, which had a worn-out cloth added to its left grip, belonged to Satoshi.

I checked my watch. It's not like I wanted to go in and have a few games, but I had no reason to hurry home. According to my motto, which is "If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick.", there was only one course of action... I should continue my journey home.

But the automatic glass door in front of me suddenly opened, and out came Satoshi. He probably noticed me inside, so he came outside to intercept me.

Wearing his usual inextinguishable smile, he lifted a hand.

"Yo!"

"Hey."

Taking a glance at my expression, Satoshi spoke.

"Hmm, you don't seem to be in a rush."

Since that was obvious, I didn't reply. Satoshi pointed at the game center.

"You passed at just the right time. How about it? A game for old times' sake? I've created the sure-kill Satoshi Special, but it just isn't the same playing against the CPU."

He was challenging me to a game. I yawned.

"I haven't played for such a long time, though."

"Me too. But Houtarou, according to a report by the Central Education Commission of Inquiry, kids these days seem to be playing games all the time. If so, it would be a educational problem if one doesn't have an interest in games as a child."

Shrugging at that joke, I advanced to the shop. I had no reason to refuse.

The game center, which I hadn't been to in a long time, was illuminated way too bright, as if that was part of their plan to promote their image. I remembered it as a place heavy with cigarette smoke, but there didn't seem to be any smoke at all now. In exchange, there were also fewer people around. The small machines had been pushed to the back of the shop, while larger machines that I hadn't seen before were throwing their weight around in the center.

It's been a really long time. I wonder how long it's been since the last time I was here. I've almost never entered the game center on my own. That would mean that the last time I came here, I was most likely with Satoshi. We used to play here often last year..., no, it was two years ago.

I didn't recognize all those games displayed on the monitors. Well, it's understandable for someone who hasn't gone to a game center in two years. As if having entered a strange land, my eyes kept wandering about. With a backward glance at me, Satoshi smoothly advanced to the inner region of the shop, and turned around when he reached a game machine.

"How about this? You remember this, right?"

Satoshi had chosen a game that even I had seen before. To be precise, I used to play it with Satoshi quite often. There were two machines designed to look like cockpits placed next to each other. It was a game that simulated a robot battle. Even after two years, or an even longer period of time, this machine was still here. Satoshi held both his hands wide and raised his voice.

"Spraying shells and shooting beams! This is definitely a man's kind of romance, so I can't invite Mayaka."

"She probably wouldn't join you even if you invited her to some other game. Right, I'll accept your challenge. Although I don't think I can control it well."

"Nah, you'll remember it immediately. Please go easy on me."

With those last words, Satoshi smoothly slid his small figure into the cockpit. Shortly thereafter, I could hear stirring techno music coming from inside the machine.

I placed my shoulder bag outside the machine and removed my trench coat to reduce my weight, and entered the other cockpit. I inserted a 100-yen coin into the slot, and challenged Satoshi to a match. Satoshi's robot was the same as the one he used two years ago, a robot which specialized in mobility and was exceptional in aerial combat. It had a sleek form, a cannon built into its right arm, and a beam cannon protruding out of its body. I also chose a robot that I used in the past, one that followed the Battleship Giant Cannon Principle[48]. It was a bulky machine with a low center of gravity. It held a smooth-bore cannon in its right hand, and had two laser guns on its shoulders[49].

After the two machines had been displayed on the monitor, the computer automatically selected the stage. It was the deck of a flying aircraft carrier. According to my vague memory, this stage had few obstacles, making it disadvantageous for Satoshi, whose robot was based on evading attacks. Well, that still doesn't make up for my two-year handicap.

"Get ready," a synthesized voice announced. The interface consisted of two joysticks and five buttons. "Go."

The match was made up of three rounds. In the first round, Satoshi was probably showing some consideration, and I was somehow allowed to spend the first half of the allotted time to get used to the controls. When there were only ten seconds remaining, I pressed a button at random, and a laser unexpectedly scored a direct hit on Satoshi's robot, which was in my direct range. At that moment, I heard some strange sounds like "Pikyaa" or "Higyaa"[50] coming from the next machine. There might be no other customers around, but it's still quite embarrassing. Satoshi's light-armored machine stalled after taking the hit, and the round was over.

Before the second round began, Satoshi quickly emerged from his cockpit and thrust his face into mine.

"So how is it? You still got it?"

"Yeah, I remember most of it. Let's go."

"OK, I won't go easy on you!"

I heard Satoshi slip into his seat as the second round began. Satoshi's machine disappeared from my line of fire immediately, meaning that he was serious now. At that instant, I made my machine move forward, and a blue flame erupted at my previous position. I rotated around to search for the enemy machine. I squeezed the trigger as soon as I saw a figure appear right behind, and fired the cannon on the right arm. But before the projectile hit, the target disappeared from my field of vision yet again. His machine's speed was incomparable to mine.

Yeah, it was always like this, I recalled as I took evasive action for the time being. To be precise, I was making my machine move in one direction. Satoshi's robot was now flying in the sky. Machine gun bullets rained down like in an air strike. It's alright if I get hit, though, since my robot has thick armor.

When we were middle school students, there were only two ways for the fight to end. My machine would either decimate Satoshi's at the beginning of the round, or Satoshi's mobile robot would run circles around my machine until the time ran out. Satoshi would win most of the time, and he would often laugh and say, "You were trying to end the match too quickly, Houtarou."

For an instant, I could see the enemy machine right in front of me, flying in the sky. With the situation worsening, I naively aimed and fired the lasers, but the target dived, avoiding the laser. While I was in the firing position and unable to move, Satoshi pointed his robot at me and used his strongest beam cannon. It was, of course, a direct hit. He then took the initiative and sprayed me with the machine gun to end the fight.

The third round.

As the metallic voice shouted, "Go", I immediately dashed forward to reduce our distance. Satoshi, in an unguarded moment, retreated without a plan. If I took this chance to continuously fire the smooth-bore cannon, I should at least hit once. That would deal a fair bit of damage to Satoshi's weakly armored robot.

But Satoshi was not the average player. I thought that he was focused on escaping, but he actually stood his ground and fired his beam cannon. Our distance was too small, so I couldn't react in time. My robot took a shot and toppled over.

While I was trying to get up, Satoshi seized the opportunity to bombard me with all his equipped firearms. An aggressive play. I could either dash out of the barrage or use my thick armor to withstand it.

"Hmm...?"

As I hurriedly moved the joysticks, I suddenly felt that something was off. Was it like this when I played with Satoshi the last time?

No, it's clearly different.

Satoshi's play style wasn't like this. Now, we were wearing out each other's armor with our respective firepower, as only a small it of time remained. Satoshi read me and pulled off an amazing dodge on my cannon shot. At that moment, Satoshi's robot was closing the distance between us. I could see a slender form approach rapidly on my monitor.

But with that straightforward movement, I could easily hit his machine with my laser. I readied my finger on the trigger. At that moment, I remembered. That's right, Satoshi's play style was "Victory Above All". He would do anything in order to win, and when he was in a disadvantageous position, he would retreat and wait for an opportunity. When he could win just by stalling for time, he would only run away, but when it was his turn to attack, he would go all out. That's not all. He would also sometimes use system faults and bugs. Anyway, Satoshi was a person who only wanted to win. When he lost, he would blame his bad luck, sulk without concealing his rage, and be really sore about it. The reason why I distanced myself from the game center was largely Satoshi's implacability, but it would be unpleasant if I told him that to his face.

What's the meaning of this head-on charge, then? ... Could it be a trap?

But I had realized it too late. I had already squeezed the trigger, causing my robot to go into a laser-firing position. If Satoshi stopped, escaped to the skies and fired his beam cannon, it would be game, set and match.

But Satoshi didn't take that course of action. Instead, all I could see on my monitor was a sword of light sliding out of his machine's right arm. A melee attack? A reckless move, to charge at me from so far away to try to cut me down.

Before the blade scythed down my robot, the laser connected at point-blank range. Satoshi's machine flipped and was blown away.

The set count was 2-1. I won.

Before the words "You Win" disappeared from the monitor, Satoshi unexpectedly peered into my cockpit. I was wondering what kind of expression he would have on his face, but it was just an anti-climatic, usual smile. He talked on and on excitedly.

"Man, that was a good game. Was it really two years since you last played, Houtarou? That was some amazing joystick handling back there. They say you'll never forget how to ride a bicycle, swim or ride a horse, but controlling a robot should be added to that list too, right?"

That's how Satoshi is, always having something frivolous to say without pause. Not unhappy at winning, I smiled.

"I really hadn't played in such a long time, so I became a beginner again. That victory was just luck."

I replied.

As the winner, I was given the right to play against the computer. Satoshi pointed at the monitor, indicating for me to continue with the game. I played half-heartedly and lost appropriately.

With a backward glance at the Game Over screen, I was about to exit the cockpit when a can of coffee appeared before my eyes. I looked up from my half-rising posture and noticed that the owner of the hand holding the coffee was Satoshi. He said,

"Here's your prize. Enjoy!"

That can of coffee was a can of hot black coffee. Without hesitation, I accepted it and pulled the pull tab.

"What's up with the generosity toady?"

"It's also compensation for unreasonably forcing you to accompany me."

"Were you really concerned about that?"

"As if!"

A can of coffee would definitely be hot, but I'm actually not very good with hot things. I leaned on a nearby machine and sipped just enough coffee to wet my tongue.

Satoshi wasn't being unnatural at all. Rather, he was in a good mood. However, that Satoshi-like behavior ran contrary to my memory. He's being like this even though he lost a game. Why that was the case, I had no idea at all.

"Hey, Satoshi. At the end of the third round."

"Hmm? Yeah, you totally got me there."

"Why didn't you fly up? If you had attacked me from the air, I would have lost... or rather, why go melee?"

Satoshi shrugged in a frivolous manner.

"When using giant robots, melee battles are the ultimate romance. It really feels good when you see them clash and slash at each other, you know? Well, being countered by a giant laser also makes a good picture, so I'm satisfied with the result."

Satoshi spoke nonchalantly. If that was true, Satoshi chose romance over victory... or in other words he lost in the name of fun.

That was a Satoshi-style loss. A suitable defeat for a spurious man of the world who pursues fun instinctively. It's not at all strange for the Satoshi I knew.

But then what was that recollection I had earlier?

"Right, moving on to the Satoshi Special 2! I'll show you the legendary yakuman[51] 'Iipinraoyue'!"

I continued slowly sipping my coffee, while Satoshi inserted a coin into the mahjong game next to me. As I watched Satoshi try to force a single-colored hand[52], two images appeared in succession at the back of my

mind.

One was of Satoshi hitting the machine after losing. The other was of Satoshi giving a can of coffee to the winner.

6.3

Judgment day had arrived, even as many humans fervently wished for its delay. Time doesn't stop, and neither does the calendar. If you refuse to accept it, you could just travel at the speed of light. No one's stopping you.

It was the 14th of February. The phrase "Saint Valentine's Day" was written clearly as the day's event on the calendar that I had received from a nearby shrine on New Year's Day. I woke up in the morning and noticed a decorated box placed outside my room. Guessing that it was another of my sister's lame jokes, I opened the lid and found a bar of chocolate, as well as a note with untidy scrawl inside the box. I read the memo... "I present to you one bar of chocolate. From Oreki Tomoe with warm and tender pity." [53]

Out front kick. I gave the box a good kick towards my room and headed to school.

There was no change from the usual at Kamiyama High School. Since students were allowed to wear their cold-weather clothes, the road to school looked livelier compared with other seasons, with people sporting coats and jumpers. I entered the school, which was not filled with the smell of sweets. It was a calm start to the fateful day.

During lunch, I was thinking about buying some walnut bread, so I headed to the canteen and entered the gigantic crowd of people. After securing the last loaf of bread, I escaped from the crowd, and that was when I noticed that Chitanda was also buying something alongside all those jostling students. Regardless of personality, her looks fulfilled the conditions for a daughter of a wealthy family, so it was amusing to see her mix with the common crowd. Probably having noticed me, Chitanda pushed her way through the mass of school uniforms. Eventually, she emerged and called out to me.

"Hello, Oreki-san."

"Hey."

As Chitanda adjusted her scarf, I noticed that all she had in her hand was a drink in a paper pack. Although I should mind my own business, I was interested, and asked,

"Chitanda, is that all you're having for lunch?"

Chitanda cast her eyes down shyly.

"No, I had prepared a bento. It's just that... recently, I have been quite hooked onto this.

She held it out for me to see, and it appeared to be a green tea milk drink. Putting aside the strange combination, I wonder if there's any caffeine, which Chitanda cannot take, in green tea... I suppose there's the placebo effect. I should keep quiet about this.

It would be a bother for us to loiter in front of the canteen in the middle of the chaos, so we walked away. Our classrooms were just next to each other.

In the tedious walk back, I asked about Ibara.

"So what happened to Ibara's chocolate in the end?"

A slight smile surfaced on Chitanda's face, as she answered with pride.

"We decided to use Cote D'or. I thought using Nestlé would be good enough, though."

We continued walking in silence for a while. Seeing that I wouldn't be getting an explanation, I asked,

"What are you talking about?"

"...Ah, sorry. We decided to use a Belgian brand. We were thinking about using the Swiss one."

She continued.

"It was a really difficult choice. We bought all kinds of chocolate from the store, and tasted all of them. It was a rare experience, but there was just so

much chocolate! To be honest, I would like to avoid chocolate for a while." She giggled. I imagined Chitanda and Ibara facing each other in the Geography Lecture Room and biting into chocolate piled on a table, and smiled. I bet the chocolate mountain which was almost touching the ceiling would fall down to earth in a twinkle.

"After indulging in so much chocolate, wouldn't you two get acne?"

"I was fine. Ibara had one on her cheek, but she hid it with a plaster."

An then Chitanda spoke as if she was seeing a dream.

"Mayaka-san made the heart-shaped mold all by herself. I never knew that she could make such handicrafts! And she even added a detailed engraving. Although Cupid is facing the wrong direction, it's still really cute! Unfortunately, the wooden frame is not very compatible with chocolate, so the texture might not be so good."

"It seems that her experience in the Manga Research Club has honed her skills to the point that she can make smooth cuts. I never used you could use a chisel for this, though."

"Mayaka-san has amazing concentration. So that's what it means to put your heart and soul into something... Isn't it lovely?"

As far as I can tell, Ibara's strong point was definitely her ability to pour her heart and soul into something, or in other words, her concentration. If Chitanda is the person to be absorbed in something, Ibara would be the one to specialize in it. By the way, Satoshi is a guy who finds satisfaction in pursuing many interests at the same time, and needless to say, I hardly show interest in most things. Moreover, to Ibara, this chocolate was her revenge match, so she would work really hard for it.

"So has she given the chocolate?"

Chitanda shook her head in response to my question and frowned slightly.

"It's quite a shame. It would be better for her to give it to him herself, but... Mayaka-san was planning to pass Satoshi the chocolate after school in the

club room, but she could not draw out of the Manga Research Club."

"What, then?"

"She's going to leave the chocolate in the club room and call Satoshi there, I guess. Even if it is not done after school, the Valentine ritual will be complete as long as it is on the 14th of February, so I thought that there would be another way, but..."

Hmm. Chitanda was constantly feeling disappointed about it, but throwing out the chocolate as if it was nothing seems like quite a refined method. I"m sure that Satoshi would prefer it that way.

Chitanda suddenly turned around, as if having just thought of something. I faced Chitanda, who had a serious look on her face.

"Ah, right, Oreki-san. It's Valentine's Day today."

" ....."

She lowered her head airily. When she looked up, clarity had returned to her expression.

"In my family, we do not give year-end gifts or Bon Festival gifts to those we are truly close to. So I apologize for failing to pay my compliments with a Valentine chocolate."

...Is that so.

I had never imagined that anyone would group Valentine chocolates and year-end gifts together.

Probably having overheard our conversation, a passing second year student quickly overtook us with a face that betrayed a smile. As I watched his figure recede, I was actually thinking of kicking his ass as hard as I could.

After school, as I was stuffing my shoulder bag with my textbooks and other miscellaneous items, I was visited by Satoshi. The drawstring bag he always carried around had been filled until it swelled into the shape of a right-angled parellelepiped. What does he even put in there? He swung his

bag around in a circle and asked,

"What are you going to do now, Houtarou?"

I decided not to go to the Geography Lecture Room as it would be absolutely foolish to do so. I wanted to get home as soon as possible, and I was about to answer as such, but when I looked out the window, I saw that the sleet that had started earlier was increasing in intensity. My boots and coat were both waterproof, and I did bring an umbrella, but...

"I'll wait until the sleet stops or turns to snow."

"Here?"

I thought for a while. The heating had been turned off, so it was cold. Furthermore, a person waiting for the weather to improve and killing time alone in a classroom on Valentine's Day after school would probably be a bother to others who might have other purposes for the room. Even I could be considerate for something like this. Even so, as I mentioned earlier, it would still be really stupid for me to go to the club room.

"Nah, I guess I'll head for the library."

As if he had been waiting for me to say this, Satoshi nodded, retrieved a book from his bag and handed it to me. It was a duodecimo-sized[54] hardcover, and is title was one that was popular ages ago. If my memory isn't mistaken, its story went like this: A man and woman were leading an ordinary life, but a small malaise soon escalated into a catastrophe from which there was no return, as the shadow of death swept through the streets! I'm not a fan of horror, though.

"You sure are reading weird books... I don't feel like reading it even if you recommend it, though."
"I never told you to read it. Just help me return it, please. It's almost due."

Instead of answering, I inserted it into my bag along with a loose leaf. Without stopping my preparations for going home, I asked,

"You're going to the club room, then?"

"Yeah, I suppose," he replied absentmindedly. Finding this strange, I spoke.

"Seems that Ibara isn't going."

Not having expected me to know that, Satoshi put on a surprised expression.

"Wow, you caught wind of that fast... was it because of Chitanda-san?"

I muttered in response,

"Apparently, she had to go to the Manga Club."

"That's what I heard."

"Chitanda was feeling really disappoint about it, that Ibara..."

Satoshi interrupted my words and went into a monologue.

"Currently, the Manga Club is having a little internal discord. The latent antagonism was actualized after the Cultural Festival, and now the Manga Research Club is split into two factions fighting for leadership: the impressionists and the naturalists. If the conflict gets worse, it would be difficult for the Manga Research Club, which has a long tradition, to avoid splitting into two. The naturalists are outnumbered by the impressionists three to one, and that's kind of sad, in my opinion. Mayaka's the ringleader of the realists, so today's meeting is probably related to that conflict."

I felt that the forced change in subject was rude, but paying it no heed, I asked about the unfamiliar terms.

"Impressionists and, what was it again?"

"Naturalists. The two factions are also known as the character-oriented group and the story-oriented group. Apparently, they're arguing as fiercely as clashing swords. I would totally like to join if I could.

He was speaking as if he was really enjoying himself. You could say that he was much more interested in this scandal compared to the event of February

14th. Well, in any case,

"You just made up the names of those two factions, right?"

Satoshi shrugged mischievously.

"Some might say that the admiration for the proponents have not yet stopped."

With that line, he swung his completely shrivelled drawstring bag. I quit Satoshi's company, and left the classroom carrying my shoulder bag and trench coat. Satoshi followed after me. Since the pathway to the Special Block and the road to the library were at opposite directions, we would part outside the classroom.

"See you next time, Oreki-kun."

Satoshi said in a theatrical tone. I responded with a little joke.

"Good luck."

"Whatever for? Seriously."

It's obvious. For the opponent of the return match, of course.

The library was surprisingly empty. I was expecting it to be filled, with it being after school in bad weather.

I inserted Satoshi's book into the return box and placed my shoulder bag on a nearby seat. I headed for a bookshelf to search for a suitable book I could skim through to kill time and returned with a collection of photographs taken at scenic and historic places in South America. There were also collections with pictures from Europe and Central Asia, but I chose South America as a form of respect to the place of origin of chocolate.

First were the usual Mayan pyramids. In the Guiana Highlands filled with greenery, the countless cavities drilled into the pyramids were a strange

sight to behold. I turned the page, and the next picture was a weird plant with fruits you could mistake for human faces attached to the trunk. The caption read, "Theobroma Cacao. Theobroma means 'food of the gods'." The book didn't mention what language that word came from.

As I examined the photograph, I unexpectedly noticed that I was actually aware of the significance of this day. But, if I'm caring about Valentine's Day, it would be a lie to say that I wasn't interested in Christmas. Then again, I have no recollection of having such thoughts on the 24th of the month before last. If I were to think back on whether there was anything impressive on Saint Valentine's Day, it would be my casual interest in Ibara's return match, as well as receiving a chocolate first thing in the morning. It might be thanks to it that I became aware and wondered if it was the 14th today.

But I can clearly proclaim that this doesn't mean that my expectations of receiving chocolate was higher this year compared to last year.

So, for example, let's assume that right now, as I'm looking at a photograph of the remains of Machu Picchu's drainage system, a person with a flushed face approaches. That imaginary person would be a female student, of course. She says, "Please accept this!" and presents a heart-shaped chocolate. How would I feel at that moment?

Naturally, I would undoubtedly be ecstatic.

But I believe that joy would be akin to the happiness one would feel when being unexpectedly recognized as a singular human being. That feeling is not materially different from having one's crudely drawn picture win a prize at a citywide competition by chance. To express it more eloquently, it would be like saying, "I don't entirely understand what's so good about it, but I'll accept this public acknowledgement with thanks."

I can only say that I doubt I would feel happy over the development of so-called "love".

My main belief is in energy conservation, with my motto being, "If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick." That belief gives me my laziness. But apart from that, it also gives me a trifling point of view

of human relationships.

The reason why I feel at ease at the Classics Club is that Satoshi, Chitanda and Ibara don't cling to one another. Even if Chitanda does destroy my tranquility with her curiosity, she wouldn't go so far as to pull me along forcibly if I seriously don't want to be involved. In fact, during last year's "Hyouka" incident and "Empress" incident, Chitanda didn't say that she needed my cooperation no matter what. She is certainly good at pressurizing me, but she wouldn't push to have her own way. If she said something like "That is your duty" or "It is natural that you do that", or cried while pleading and pestering me to help, I would have probably quit the Classics Club.

But how do you handle a love affair with that attitude? Would one be able to expect that style or force it from the subject of the love affair?

….. It is a common saying that living organisms exist to pass their genes on, or in other words, to bear offspring. Love would then just be the sublimated desire to propagate. From that point of view, I could be said to be incomplete as a living organism. But since I'm also a human being, I don't need to go out with someone just because of biological needs. That's why I don't worry about myself being an incomplete organism.

Speaking of desire, it would be enough for me to say that I desire the chocolate. I like spicy things, but I'm relatively fine with sweet things too.

I was thinking about this while looking at a bright orange poisonous frog which inhabits a dense forest.

"I've finally found you, Oreki-san."

Having my name called all of a sudden, I turned around to see Chitanda's face being surprisingly close. After colliding into the line of vision of her huge eyes, I looked away without thinking.

My throat hurt in the dry winter air. I coughed once.

"Now that you've finally found me, do you need anything?"

"No."

"....."

Chitanda took a glance at the deserted library and spoke.

"I thought that if you were here, Fukube-san would be here too."

So she was looking for Satoshi, huh?"

"We don't stick together forever, you know."

"That was what I thought, but... Do you know where Fukube-san is now?"

As I was about to respond to the question, I realized that something was strange. Satoshi was heading towards the Geography Lecture Room. But if that was the case, Chitanda wouldn't be here searching for him.

"He didn't reach the room?"

Chitanda nodded slightly.

"He seemed to be a little late, so I came here to check on him. Since this concerns Mayaka-san, I don't think he would forget, but perhaps something happened..."

Hm. I checked my watch. I don't remember the exact time, but I think it hasn't been thirty minutes since Satoshi announced that he was going to the club room and parted with me. The time now is a little before five. The sun was starting to set, so I understand Chitanda's anxiety.

But that's just Fukube Satoshi. It's inexcusable to make others wait, but it's just like him to wander off for half an hour or so.

I flipped a page of the photograph collection and answered with a distant view of Mexico City in front of me.

"He's quite loose with time, but he did say that he was going to the club room. You should wait for him a little longer."

"The exact time was not decided, so I cannot say that he's late. I understand, I will try waiting for him."

The soft ending of Chitanda's sentence seemed to project her worry, but with that, she turned her black hair around and left. Damn that Satoshi, he just can't let anything proceed smoothly. I was thinking that it was about time for me to go home, so I looked out the window, but the sleet wouldn't end. Having no choice, I pushed my chair further in and proceeded to the next page.

6.4

The sleet only ended after I had completed my simulated experience of South America from Mexico City to Rio De Janeiro. I returned the photograph collection to its bookshelf, and was about to put on my white trench coat when a visitor arrived.

The sliding door was suddenly flung open.

"Oreki-san!!"

With an improper level of energy for a library, where one should be quiet on principle, Chitanda drew nearer. I was about to tell her to not make so much noise, but when I scanned my surroundings, I found that the only people left in the library were myself, the student librarians and the head librarian, Itoigawa-sensei.

Chitanda's countenance was different compared with the last time she was here. Now, her lips were pursed tightly, and her eyes, which were huge even under normal cicumstances, were wide open. Seems like something bad has happened. Satoshi also appeared from behind Chitanda, swinging his drawstring bag. He had a drained expression, and I could feel that his usual high tension had cooled down quite a bit.

"Houtarou, you're still here?"

"I said that I would be here until the sleet ended, didn't I?"

I looked at the two of them one after the other, and said to Chitanda,

"It seems like you have something for me this time, but I'm just about to go home."

Chitanda nodded once slightly, then nodded once more deeply.

"Ah, yes, I understand that it is quite late. But I would really appreciate your help."

"Sorry, but can't it wait till tomorrow? Whether I help you or not, you can

tell me about it tomorrow."

I said and was about to leave the library.

But before I could, Chitanda blocked my path. I unconsciously frowned, and Chitanda spoke with downcast eyes.

"I apologize, but at least hear me out... It's my fault. I carelessly left the clubroom door open. I've done something horrible to Mayaka-san..."

. It appears that this isn't simply a manifestation of Chitanda's usual curiosity. Her fists were clenched tightly, and her originally white skin had become all the more pale. Perhaps because she was disconcerted, or due to some other reason, her legs were also trembling slightly.

I asked Satoshi a brief question.

"What happened?"

"Well, it's not really anything significant, but..."

Chitanda's voice, which was supposed to over Satoshi's words, was small and weak.

"The chocolate..."

"The chocolate?"

"Mayaka-san's hand-made chocolate was stolen! And she put in her utmost effort to make it!"

I looked at Satoshi. He shrugged, as if to say "This sure is troubling" and nodded.

Ibara's chocolate? Stolen, you say?

Ah, I see.

Again, that's...

. It's been 10 months since I entered Kamiyama High School and joined the Classics Club. Over that period of time, I've been coerced to act as an intermediary for Chitanda's problems, which was probably comparable to three years' worth of middle school troubles.

My experience in dealing with all that has not crushed my energy conservation motto. But it's true that I have gained a degree of adaptability for when I have to move.

I probably looked as if I had consumed a bitter bug. With that expression, I put my arms through the sleeves of my trench coat and said,

"Let's go. We'll look for it."

Ah, and the sleet has already stopped. But this would be the social obligation of a livelihood, I suppose. In my case, Ibara and I aren't close, even though we've known each other for such a long time. I wonder what kind of expression she would have if she found out that her chocolate got stolen. I definitely wouldn't want to see that!

After all, I'm not a fan of horror.

We crossed the connecting bridge and moved towards the Special Block.

The Geography Lecture Room was on the fourth floor. As we were about to go up the stairs,

"Hold it!"

A voice rang out, stopping me in my tracks. Satoshi thrust his palm out at me.

I didn't even get the chance to wonder what the problem was, for the flight of stairs I was about to ascend had a yellow and black vinyl rope strung across it. For the past few days, various places in school were being waxed sequentially. Under the rope was a note that said, "Just waxed. Usage of the staircase is prohibited."

There are two staircases. We went to the other one and ascended it. As we were moving from the third floor to the fourth, a first year student with a perm called out.

"Excuse me, is this level?"

It seems that he had been sticking a poster to the notice board. It read, "Handicrafts Club Graduation Works Exhibition. Venue: Communications Building Classroom 1-C" I half-heartedly answered that it was fine and was about to hurry on, but Satoshi spoke up behind me.

"It's too low."

Now that I think about it, the right side does seem to be lower. Behind Satoshi, Chitanda also gave a response.

"That poster is trapezoidal, but that is intentional, right?"

The craftsman... I mean the handicrafts club member[55] took a step back from the poster, stared at the poster fixedly, then spat out in a small voice,

"Oh, what the hell."

He then took out a cutter knife and a ruler, tore off the poster and sat on the floor. His skillful work thus began.

Praying for his success, I headed for the Geography Lecture Room.

The door was unlocked. I stopped upon entering the room, and tried to endure the cold. It's probably so cold because I was in the warm library for a long time, but even so, it's freezing here.

Chitanda approached a chair that was in the middle of the room, and put her hand on the table in front of it.

"It was placed here."

I see. Indeed, there was no chocolate on the table now.

Before I said anything, Chitanda summarized the situation straightforwardly.

"The chocolate was wrapped in red wrapping paper. There was no ribbon or anything like one tied around it. As for its size... it was heart-shaped, so it took up a large space."

She held out her hands to show the chocolate's width, increasing the gap little by little until it reached the size of her waist. She then tilted her head and reduced the size of the imaginary chocolate by just a bit.

"It was this big."

It seems that Chitanda not only had keen senses, unfailing memory and excellent observation skills, but also possessed extraordinary spatial recognition. Even so, that's a gigantic chocolate.

"What about Ibara?"

"I have not told her yet. It may seem cowardly, but I plan to try looking for it first before telling her."

Chitanda continuously stroked the table, as if doing so would cause the chocolate to return.

"The chocolate was here when I went off to look for Fukube-san. In other words, it was here until 4:45 on my watch. I returned to the clubroom when it was a little past 5 o'clock. If only I hadn't left the door unlocked for those fifteen minutes..."

Her last sentence was so inaudible that I almost could not catch her words. This is pretty natural for the kindhearted Chitanda, but it seems that she has taken quite a shock.

"But, well, Chitanda-san, you aren't the manager of Mayaka's chocolate, so you don't have to agonize about it so much."

"But I feel that it's inexcusable to Fukube-san..."

"As I said, it's not your responsibility. If you're in the wrong, then I'm even

worse for being late."

That was unexpected. I thought that Satoshi was the cold-blooded type of guy, unable to show this kind of consideration. As for me, while I'm a person with a hot heart and not a cold-blooded person, I decided not to add any awkward words to the exchange.

I surveyed the room. The Geography Lecture Room did not possess any special equipment. As for normal classroom objects, it had a teaching platform, a blackboard, tables, chairs and cleaning equipment. With only these items, it would be easy to search for anything.

However, there were over forty tables. I knocked a nearby table with my fist.
"Are you sure that it isn't in this room? What about the drawers below the tables?"

"Nope, I checked this room with Chitanda-san earlier. There's no doubt it isn't here."

Yeah, I thought so.

But wait a minute.

"Didn't Chitanda confirm that the chocolate was missing on her own?"

In response to that question, Chitanda answered.

"I found Fukube-san while I was returning to the room so we entered together."

"It was in that staircase. I met Chitanda-san on the landing between the third and fourth floor."

I see. That staircase, huh.

…... A flash of inspiration hit me. I turned around my trench coat. I don't like walking round and round, but our destination was close. Chitanda asked a question as I was leaving the room.

"Where are you going?"

"How long has that craftsman been there?"

I spoke as I left the clubroom. The two of them followed behind.

"Who do you mean by craftsman?"

"Oh, that guy with the perm. He was sticking the poster on the wall."

" ...You mean the Handicrafts Club member."

There was a slight pause as Chitanda thought for a while.
"He was just unrolling the poster when I met Fukube-san."

"That's convenient."

Satoshi probably understood my purpose with that sentence, but I'm not sure about Chitanda, who can be unbelievably slow. Just to be sure, I added,

"If the craftsman was there the whole time, he'll probably remember the people who used the staircase. Because of the waxing, this staircase is the only way up here."

"Ah... That's true!"

Chitanda's voice, which sounded quite depressed earlier, sprang out like a shining ray of light. But in contrast, Satoshi was solemn.

"Any possibility that the crasftman was the thief?"

"None."

"Huh?"

"Would anyone loiter around the area worrying about the straightness of his poster after committing a theft?"

We went around the girls' toilet and down the stairs. The craftsman was still

in front of the notice board, using his cutter knife. When he noticed us, he unrolled his poster.

"How is it now?"

Chitanda took one look and cut him town mercilessly.

"It now looks like a parallelogram with no regular angles."

"....."

"More importantly, we have a question for you. Do you remember who passed by since you started work?"
The craftsman seemed intimidated by Chitanda's earnest look. He turned to the two of us, who were at the back.

"Did something happen?"

I was wondering about how to answer him, but Satoshi gave a quick, easy reply.

"Just some trouble. We suspect that those who passed by here might be the culprit."

"Hmm..."

It seemed like he didn't comprehend that explanation, but the craftman answered without caring about it.

"Yeah, I remember."

"H-how many people were there?"

The craftsman grinned at the enthusiastic Chitanda.

"Three people."

Three people? That means...

"Who were they?"

Erm, that's really slow of you, Chitanda. I tapped her shoulder. After the young lady turned around, I pointed at the both of us in succession.

"Two of us with Satoshi makes three."

I looked at the craftsman to confirm that statement, and he nodded.

"Are you certain about that?"

The craftsman assured Chitanda,

"I'm pretty good when it comes to remembering faces. It's also not like I was so focused on sticking the poster that I didn't notice anyone passing by."

I turned around , and Chitanda tilted her head.

"What does this mean?"

I stole a glance at Satoshi and answered.

"It means what it means. The person who stole the chocolate was on the fourth floor, and is still on the fourth floor... Satoshi."

"Mm? What is it?"

"What clubs use the classrooms on the fourth floor of the Special Block?"

Satoshi was puffed up with pride.

"So you're finally using me as a database. That's nice of you. Hmm, there's the Classics Club, Light Music Club, Acapella Club, Astronomy Club, as well as... Yeah, the Philosophy Club should also be on the fourth floor, although it has zero members."

He continued,

"Seems that you're actually serious about this. That's rare."

I considered yelling, "I'm doing this for your sake, you ungrateful bastard!" but I was tired, so I relented. Furthermore, Chitanda was also there, so I

definitely can't say all that.

"So we should be able to get it back, then... But why would they do such a thing?"

Chitanda asked, probably having some room for curiosity after feeling hopeful. Now, that would be the biggest problem.

But for now...
"For now let's be utilitarian; save your questions for later. Now let's check out the remaining clubs, it might turn out to be smoother than expected."

"That would be great."

Chitanda nodded, and politely expressed her gratitude to the craftsman before going up the stairs.

We checked out which clubs were still here, and it did turn out well.

The light music club was borrowing some hall somewhere and were preparing for their live performance without hesitation. As for the Acapella Club, it was customary for them to practice in he Courtyard. Moreover, it's probably impossible to move their tongues in this cold weather, so they could have just all gone home. Nothing needs to be said about the Philosophy Club, so the only clubs currently on the fourth floor of the Special Block were the Classics Club and Astronomy Club. Chitanda frowned.

"So the Astronomy Club did it….. "

"Let's see how it goes."

I said as we headed to the Astronomy Club's room, Electives Room 5. Satoshi muttered en route,

"The Astronomy Club, huh. That person might be there."

"Do you know someone there?"

Satoshi nodded to Chitanda's question.

"It's someone both of you should know. Sawakiguchi-senpai is in the Astronomy Club."

"Oh, you mean her, That is reassuring... right?"
That would make the situation even more delicate, I think. Sawakiguchi Misaki. I remember that name. She was involved in the "Empress" incident which occured in the final stages of summer last year. After that, she was in the Astronomy Club team which faced off against the Classics Club during the Cultural Festival, but they self-destructed. I'm pretty certain that she tried cooking bananas in dashi[56].

There was only one classroom surrounded by the Geography Lecture room and Electives Room 5. If the Astronomy Club members really stole the chocolate, it wouldn't even take them twenty seconds.

We stood outside the classroom and we could hear raucous laughter from within. The three of us looked at each other. Chitanda nodded and knocked the door.

"Hmm? Come in!"

I recognized the voice that responded.

Chitanda opened the sliding door.

We were greeted with warm air blowing on our faces. It was against school regulations for students to change the temperature settings on the school's heaters, but with this stirring warmth, you could tell that the Astronomy Club didn't know about that rule. A bespectacled guy's vision would turn complete white immediately upon entering the room.

There were a few students sitting in a circle. One, two,..... , five people in total. They had stuck some tables together, and had scattered some sort of paper on it. For some reason, there were also ten dice lying nearby. The boy to girl ratio was 3:2. In the summer-like warmth of the room, all the boys

were wearing their uniforms, and one girl was wearing her sailor uniform.

The girl not wearing the sailor uniform, and the apparent owner of the voice, was, as Satoshi mentioned, Sawakiguchi. She must like that hairstyle a lot, since her hair was, like all the other times I've seen her, done up in dango shapes on the sides of her head. The dango were caramel brown and were wrapped in stylish black laces. But, she was wearing the unrefined school regulation jersey.

When Chitanda's eyes met Sawakiguchi's, her head lowered by about fifteen degrees, and she smiled.

"Good afternoon, Sawakiguchi-san. Please return the chocolate."

I was wondering if I should cover Chitanda's mouth, or slap the back of her head, but thankfully, Sawakiguchi apparently did not catch that erratic opening.

"What about the chocolate? Hm, if I remember correctly, you're Chitanda, right?"

"Yes, I'm Chitanda Eru."

"You here for?"

Just when Chitanda was about to blurt out something weird again, Satoshi swiftly cut in.

"It's an emergency. We were calling on Senpai in the hopes of receiving your assistance."

It was a ludicrous way of putting it, but a childlike smile spread on Sawakiguchi's face. I guess it's easy for the two weirdos to communicate with each other.

"Hmm. Will this take time?"

"We should be done in three minutes."

During that exchange, I examined the interior of the room once again. The bags and winter clothes of the Astronomy Club members were randomly strewn around the group of tables. They came in different shapes and sizes, but there were five bags and five sets of winter wear. There was also a sack, but based on past experience, it belonged to Sawakiguchi. The Astronomy Club members were all staring at me with dubious expressions, probably wondering what was going on. It seems that we intruded at an interesting moment, for there was a guy with an unreservedly sullen face.

Sawakiguchi lightly nodded two or three times, then made an announcement to the Astronomy Club members.

"I'll be gone for a while. Before charging in, if the draw difficulty is three and below, you can buy it for an extra 50%."

Sawakiguchi got up from her seat and was showered with booing from the Astronomy Club members.

"50%!"

"Three and below, but there's nothing left to buy..."

In response, Sawakiguchi spoke.

"Shouldn't you be grateful that I'm allowing for resupplies at this crucial moment? If anyone cheats, he'll take the penalty and pay double the price."

She waved her hand and went out into the corridor. Chitanda bowed politely again.

"I apologize for troubling you at a busy moment... but what were you doing?"

Sawakiguchi gave a short reply.

"Oh, SF."

"Science fiction?"

In addition to my casual question, Satoshi asked,

"Space fantasy?"

"It's called Star Fighter[57], I think. In any case..."
Sawakiguchi threw a glance at me, tiptoed until she could see the top of my head, and folded her arms.

"That trench coat's pretty cool."

Satoshi followed her lead.

"That's right, senpai. As expected, you do have quite the eye! That's Houtarou's one good set of winter clothing, and it looks as if it could be concealing a Thompson machine gun! Frightening, isn't it!"

I would hide one if I could. It would come in handy when I'm playing the straight man to your dumb jokes.

Chitanda politely called out at Sawakiguchi, who was still staring intently at my coat.

"Erm, senpai."

"Ah, right. So? Did something happen?"

"Yes."

Chitanda nodded and turned back to glance at me.

By putting on the brakes here, Chitanda has shown that she has changed a little over the last ten months. She's not good with saying things indirectly. This straightforward approach has come to fruition quite a few times, but right now, we're suspecting the Astronomy Club members of theft. Accusing them directly might turn the situation sour. Aiming to prevent that outcome, I stepped forward.

"Excuse me, Sawakiguchi-senpai."

"You're... Yeah, you're the detective Oreki-kun."

I was slightly displeased by the baseless nickname, but I swallowed it down and pointed to the Geography Lecture Room.
"Actually, we've had a Valentine chocolate stolen from our room."

Sawakiguchi's gaze became stern. But, this is where the deception begins.

"So, we are searching for anyone who saw the thief. Did anyone use the corridor from 4:45 to 5 o'clock?"

I couldn't tell if the petty trick of sidestepping the search for the suspect and instead looking to gather eyewitnesses worked. With an interested smile, Sawakiguchi spoke.

"A stolen Valentine chocolate, huh? It shouldn't be a love thief, but there are people who would do this kind of elegant things, right?"

What exactly is so elegant about this? I wish I could show her Chitanda biting her lip in regret after the chocolate got stolen.

Sawakiguchi turned her head.

"4:45 to 5 o'clock? Sorry, but we were really fired up just now, so I don't remember the time at all. However, some of them left their seats... Nakayama, Yoshihara and Oda, I think. I was the one who told them to, though."

Three out of five people, huh. I could sense Chitanda's expression clouding over.

But there's still one more thing to narrow down our search.

"Was there anyone who packed their bags and left to go home?"

"Why do you ask? No one did that."

"Ah, is Oda-san that girl over there?"

"That's girl's Nakayama."

As expected, even Sawakiguchi seemed sullen after the succession of questions. While preserving the playful atmosphere, she put her hands on her hips and glared at me.

"For your information, no one here came in with a chocolate. You can think that it's a lie, Detective-kun, but that would be a little unpleasant, right?"

Sawakiguchi declared, and suddenly opened the door to the classroom. She then raised her voice and asked the people inside,

"Did any of you guys catch a glimpse of something that looks like chocolate in this room?"

Laughter rose from the male members of the Astronomy Club.

"Senpai, could you not ask something so depressing?"

"Wish I could say I have!"

Sawakiguchi pointed to them, indicating that they were the proof.

"So, is that all you wanted to ask? Are we done?"

As I had expected, she had stopped being friendly. Even with that small trick, we still drew her suspicion in the end. Well, I have no choice but to say that I can't do anything about that. Based on my beliefs, I tend to dislike quarrels, but..... Seriously, this is such a troublesome conversation.

I at least managed to maintain my civility and bowed to Sawakiguchi-senpai.

"Thank you for your help, senpai. I apologize for saying something so rude."

"Ah, whatever."

With those words, Sawakiguchi went back to Electives Room 5 without turning back. I don't know if it was my just my imagination, but the sound of the closing door seemed louder than usual. Shortly thereafter, a

remarkably cheerful voice shouting, "Alright, let's continue!" could be heard from the room.
Chitanda looked at the closed door and me with a sorrowful expression.

"Oreki-san.....Sawakiguchi-san is mad at us, right?"

"Of course she's mad."

" .....But! We have to get Mayaka-san's chocolate back!"

I turned around. Even Satoshi's expression was clouded over. His usual smile had almost disappeared, and had somehow taken on a self-deriding tone.

"Houtarou. . "

It seems that he wants to tell me something.

Paying him no heed, I suggested heading back to the Geography Lecture Room for the time being. It was getting pretty dark outside. I guess it's time to bring this to an end.

6.5

The Geography Lecture Room was a corner room with windows on three sides, so it's easy for cold air to steal in. I lowered my head as the oppressive coldness seemed to exert a force from above.

"It's cold."

I muttered without thinking and received some warm replies.

"Is that so? I feel that it's fine."

"You're the only one here snugly wearing your coat, and you're complaining about the cold?"

No, it's seriously freezing here.

I glanced at the window and found that it was white outside. I thought that the sleet had stopped, but it had turned to snow. I've heard of White Christmas, but would this be called a White Valentine? It somehow sounds like a brand of white wine.

I sat down at a nearby table. Standing in front of me, Chitanda spoke with a voice that betrayed her fatigue.

"What should we do, Oreki-san? I don't want to believe that the Astronomy Club did it, but..."

Instead of answering, I replied with a question.

"Is there any way to reach the fourth floor besides going up that staircase?"

Like me, Satoshi sat on a table, placed his bag on his knees and shook his head.

"It's certainly not impossible. One could use the emergency staircase or evacuation chute. However, using either would be a serious matter. Using the waxed staircase on the other side isn't out of the question, though. You could still use it if you wanted to."

"But there were no traces of anyone using it. If anyone went up those stairs, they would leave footprints. There's also a staircase to the roof, but it's usually locked. Students can't go to the roof without a teacher's supervision."

That would mean that the staircase with the craftsman would be the only route. Of course, if you went on a helicopter and tried rappelling down, you would probably succeed, but I wouldn't think that Ibara's chocolate contains a secret so huge that it needs to be obtained at all cost, to the extent that one would use spy-like methods to steal it.

... But wait a minute. Ibara was using a Belgian brand of chocolate. It's common knowledge that Belgium is a member of the EU. What if Ibara's chocolate somehow contained a microchip that would harm the stability of Europe? That would explain the rappelling and hovering.

"Oreki-san?"

"No, it's nothing."

There weren't any helicopter sounds earlier.

Where would the chocolate be? I stared at the snow, and hit upon another possibility.

"So, when you were searching for the chocolate, did you look below?"

"Below, you say?"

Moving my fingertip in a half parabola, I asked,

"If the chocolate was thrown out of the window, it would fall to the ground, right?"

Chitanda shook her head.

"If that was the case, I would have seen it."

So she hadn't overlooked that. But what about this?

"Have you checked the girls' toilet?"

I was met with flabbergasted replies.

"What?"

"What did you say?"

"The girls' toilet. In that fifteen minutes, there was nowhere to go on the fourth floor of the Special Block besides this room, Electives Room 5, and the girls' toilet. Furthermore, the chocolate is neither here nor outside. Therefore, don't you think that there is the possibility that someone hid it in the girls' toilet?"

Without waiting for me to finish speaking, Chitanda fluttered her skirt and stepped forward. Noticing that I wasn't moving, she said reprovingly,
"I didn't think of that. Let's go!"

"Let's go," she said. How absurd.

"Sorry, but you can go by yourself."

"Oreki-san, having more hands would be..."

"If this floor's toilet was a boys' toilet, would you be able to rush in?"

It seems that Chitanda wasn't really aware of her surroundings. "Ah," a sound escaped from her lips as she blushed, bowed her head twice and hurriedly left the room. By the way, the first and third floors of the Special Block had boys' toilets, while the girls' toilets were on the second and fourth floors.

Satoshi watched Chitanda leave with a smile. Dangling his legs, he asked,

"Do you really think it's in the toilet?"

I answered without bothering to hide my boredom.

"Nope. Not even a chance in 10,000."

"A chance in 10,000 means 0.01%. Is it that unlikely?"

"Satoshi."

I released a sigh.

"I was just throwing an idea out. Just shut up for a bit."

"... I see."

With that, Satoshi closed his mouth. It seemed that his unextinguishable smile had gone out. It would take about three minutes for Chitanda to return. The Geography Lecture Room was silent.

Chitanda returned, her shoulders dropping weakly.
"It wasn't there..."

I nodded and spoke.

"Then, there's only one possibility."

"Eh?"

Chitanda, who had been hanging her head in shame, looked up. The moment that we had been putting off finally arrived.

The door of the Geography Lecture Room opened, and that person entered. Wearing a beige jumper over her sailor uniform and donning a knit hat was Ibara Mayaka. The band-aid on her left cheek was to hide the pimple she got from trying out too much chocolate. Ibara looked at all of us and gave a bewildered expression.

"Huh, why is everyone here?"

"Mayaka-san..."

I could hear the slight trembling in Chitanda's murmur. However, Ibara, not noticing Chitanda's expression, took off her hat and spoke in a lighthearted tone.

"Ah, so how was my chocolate?"

So she asked about it right off the bat, huh. Well, it's her biggest concern, so it was obvious that she would do so.

I quickly looked at Satoshi. However, he was looking at Ibara with a vague, expressionless face. It didn't seem like he was going to say anything.

Since it had come to this, I thought that I should at least say something I opened my mouth, but probably noticing that, Chitanda raised her hand, causing me to stop. I think she wanted to say it by herself, so I had no choice but to stay silent.

Chitanda stared seriously at Ibara.

"Mayaka-san, I am very sorry."

This time, I could not feel the quavering in her words. It seems that she had resolved to tell Ibara the truth. On the other hand, Ibara had a quizzical look on her face.

"What for? There isn't anything you should be apologizing about, is there?"

"Yes. Actually..."

She was still hesitant to say it.

"When I left the classroom without locking the door, your chocolate was stolen... I'm sorry."

Chitanda said this with a firm voice and an unreserved attitude, but her eyes had turned red.

Then, having received this confession, Ibara responded with an unexpected attitude.

All she did was mutter a few words.

"Hmm. I see."

After a brief pause, a troubled, bitter smile appeared on her face.

"So it was stolen, huh."

With that expression, and with those words.

I couldn't believe that Ibara was reacting this way. Knowing her, I thought that she would spit out words with unconcealed rage. That's how it should have been. Regardless of how estranged I am from matters of love, I wouldn't let this pass if I were Ibara.

But she remained calm. Inversely proportional to that, Chitanda's feelings were overflowing.

"Mayaka-san, I. ....!"

Ibara turned to Chitanda and shook her head.

"Don't look so sad, Chii-chan. Are you worried about not having locked the door? There's no way that you would have known that someone would steal a Valentine chocolate."

"But!"

"Even if someone else's at fault, I wouldn't blame Chii-chan. Not at all. Actually, I don't even remember asking you to look after the chocolate. I feel like I've done something wrong. You helped me so much, and I wasted your efforts."

As she spoke, Ibara put on the hat she had just taken off. She looked away from Chitanda, sighed, and muttered.

"Yeah, but, it does hurt a little. I'll be going home for today. Chii-chan don't fret over it, okay?"

With that, she turned on her heels and exited the Geography Lecture Room with a composed gait. No one called out at her retreating figure.

Chitanda, Satoshi, and I. There was no doubt that all our thoughts differed as we watched Ibara walk away.

After Ibara left, Chitanda waited for her figure to disappear down the stairs before stepping forward resolutely. Reading her intentions, I got off the desk and went in front of Chitanda. Without hesitating, she proceeded until the tip of her nose was about to touch me. Only then did she finally stop.

"　Please step aside."

"What are you going to do?"

She was way too close. I took a step backward as I spoke. However, Chitanda stepped forward in response to my retreat.

"Even if I have to use forceful measures, I will find Mayaka-san's chocolate. If I do not do this, I will not be able to face her tomorrow."

"As everyone has said, it's not your fault. Even a lawyer would agree. It was beyond the scope of risk prediction.

"I don't know anything about the law. I simply cannot forgive myself. Today was supposed to make Mayaka-san happy, but now it has turned out like this. I cannot just stand here without doing anything!"

She tried to slip past me.

My right hand reflexively shot out and grabbed Chitanda's right wrist.

Her hand was warm.

Since I was holding on to her wrist, I could feel from her chordal movements that she was focusing her strength in her fist. Should I let go, or should I continue holding on? While I was undecided, I spoke out.

"I can't say that I understand your feelings. I don't feel things as strongly as you. But please, leave this to me. I'll definitely pass Ibara's chocolate to Satoshi by the end of the day."

I'd never thought that the day when the energy saver, Oreki Houtarou would say, "Leave this to me" would ever come.

Chitanda's huge eyes widened ever more. However, she did not release the

energy in her fist.

" .....I'm happy that you would say this, but if that's the case, I will search for it with you."

I shook my head.

"No. I've thought of something but I can't do it with you around."

A temporary silence descended. Chitanda asked in a small voice,

"You have an idea?"

I let Chitanda's hand go. Perhaps I had been exerting pressure with my hand without knowing it, for Chitanda lightly stroked the wrist that had been gripped.

Since it had come to this, I had no choice. I slowly nodded.

"Who did it?"

"There can only be one person holding on to the chocolate right now. It's her."

I let out a sigh.

"Nakayama from the Astronomy Club."

A table clattered. Satoshi was half-rising to his feet, but I ignored it for the moment.

"Based on the craftsman's testimony, we were the only people who went up the stairs from the third floor. Based on Sawakiguchi's testimony, there are only three Astronomy Club members who could have stolen the chocolate."

"Oda-san, Nakayama-san and Yoshihara-san, right?"

"Let's assume that one of them came in and tried to steal the chocolate. But if you were the thief, how would you do it? Ibara's chocolate is pretty large."

Chitanda nodded, and spread her hands to show a size slightly smaller than her waist.

"It was about this big."

"There's no way you can hide something of that size. Since they didn't hide it in the toilet or throw it outside, they could have only brought it with them into Electives Room 5. However, Sawakiguchi said that no one came in a with a chocolate. The other members said so as well. It would be a different matter if the whole Astronomy Club was in one it, but it would be weird if that weren't the case."

I pointed at myself and Satoshi.

"It's impossible to hide that size of chocolate in a school uniform. They could hide the chocolate in a bag if they had one, and I could probably fit it in the pocket of my coat. However, none of the Astronomy Club members left to go home. They didn't leave the room with their bags or winter wear. Furthermore, the pants pockets are too small, and even if they hid it in their clothes, the bulky chocolate would cause their movements to be unnatural and make them noticeable."

Next, I pointed at Chitanda.

"However, it's possible with a sailor uniform. If the chocolate was attached to her thigh with tape, it could be hidden by the skirt... I have no idea what that Astronomy Club member, Nakayama, was thinking when she stole Ibara's chocolate. Perhaps both of them have some feud unknown to us. But putting aside the question of why, since Nakayama is the only one who could have hidden the chocolate, I can only think that she has it right now."

After a short pause, I spoke again.

"I'll pass Ibara's chocolate to Satoshi today. Although I have absolute confidence that it is right, you being there would trouble me. So don't worry, and just go home for today."

Chitanda looked into my eyes.

….. I instantly averted my gaze, showing just how much of a pathetic guy I was.

But even so, a small part of Chitanda's smile returned to her face.

"It's rare for you to go so far as to say something like that."

"Is that so?"

Actually, I also thought so. It was pretty much asking the impossible from myself.

"I understand. I do not know what you plan on doing, but since you said that it's better this way, I'll take your word for it."

The tension drained from my body. My expression probably became more relaxed as well.

"Right. I'll call you if it succeeds."

Chitanda said that she would be waiting for my call, and bowed.

She left, leaving behind me and Satoshi.

Looking at the pitch-black exterior, I frowned at the fact that it was still snowing, and shouldered my bag.

"Well, let's go."

In response to those words, Satoshi got off from the desk he was sitting on.

"Yeah, let's go."

I made sure that I didn't forget to securely lock the door.

6.6

The road home at night. Headlights and tail lights flashed by. Snow fell on the front of my coat.

The wind was cold, so I buried my neck in my trench coat. Satoshi was walking next to me, with a drawstring bag on his arm and a backpack on his back. The only thing protecting from the cold was his vest.

"The Valentine chocolate was stolen by tying it to her leg, huh?"

I muttered the words I had said earlier, and burst into laughter.

"That's impossible, isn't it?"

"And I thought that stood to reason."

Satoshi said as he swung his drawstring bag around. I also laughed at that statement.

"No, it doesn't."

"Really?"

"The female student wouldn't have been able to learn that Ibara had decided to leave the chocolate in the club room. Even if she somehow did, Chitanda was looking after it, and she couldn't have predicted that Chitanda would go out and look for you."

"She could have, I think."

"Alright, let's assume that she knew everything. Even so, the chocolate would melt due to contact with human skin. When chocolate melts, it gives off a unique smell you can never hide. And more importantly..."

The pedestrian signal started to flicker as we got to the middle of the crossing. We jogged across the road, and Satoshi turned around.

"...I can't imagine an honest person stealing a Valentine chocolate."

Satoshi gave a cynical laugh.

"There's no guarantee that Nakayama's an honest person."

"Since an indecent person has been involved from the beginning, of course you would doubt her."

A thin layer of snow had accumulated on the walkway. A sharp squeaking sound could be heaerd with every step I took. Strong winds blew for a while. I resisted the wind by hugging my shoulders and waited for it to die down.

"I suppose I should fulfill the promise."

Satoshi was silent.

"...Pass me your bag."

I could hear a laugh coming from Satoshi's throat as he followed my request. I received the drawstring bag, and gave it a strong vertical swing. "Crrk". A sound was produced. It sounded like broken pieces rubbing against each other.

I returned the bag to Satoshi with a disagreeable politeness.

"That was amazing, Houtarou."

Satoshi may have smiled, but I could only see it as a mere habit or a bluff.

The person who stole the chocolate was Satoshi.

I had already concluded that Satoshi was the only possible culprit after Chitanda said that the chocolate had been stolen. Even without that prediction, Satoshi would still be the only suspect by the process of elimination. After striking out the Astronomy Club, the only person who could have stolen the chocolate was someone who went up from the third floor. According to the craftsman, three people used that route: Chitanda, Satoshi, and me. I'm obviously not the thief, and Chitanda is out of the question since she's the victim. Thus, this leaves only Satoshi.

Satoshi probably hid in the boys' toilet on the third floor after we parted and he told me that he was heading to the club room. The toilet is right next to the staircase, and the third floor toilet is for male students. Satoshi waited there for a while, knowing that Chitanda would leave the room to search for him sooner or later.

Confirming that Chitanda had passed the staircase, Satoshi headed for the fourth floor. On the way, Satoshi was seen by the craftsman. It's also possible that he was asked about the straightness of the poster. If my memory isn't mistaken, when the craftsman asked for our help earlier. Satoshi's reply was "It's too low." If he hadn't said something like "Move the right side down." earlier, he wouldn't have used those words.

In the empty club room, Satoshi appropriated Ibara's chocolate. But to his surprise, he found that it was enormous. He had planned to hide it in his drawstring bag, so he was at a loss. Satoshi's bag could barely fit a duodecimo-sized book. No matter how slim Chitanda's waist is, it's definitely bigger than a book.

If he just took the chocolate and ran, he might bump into Chitanda at the staircase, and that would be the end of the chocolate game. So what did Satoshi do?

The street lamps had already lit up. The road was reaching the bridge soon. it was a narrow bridge meant for pedestrian use. If two people were to walk side by side, they wouldn't be able to pass each other. With nothing to block the wind, the sound of the blowing wind grew even stronger.

"Did you hesitate at all when you were breaking it?"

My small voice was caught up in the wind, so Satoshi probably didn't manage to hear it. There was no reply.

Satoshi broke the chocolate. He probably did so by bringing his elbow down on the wrapping paper. If he had been aware that it was the heart-shaped chocolate that Ibara made, he might have folded it neatly. But the result is the same. The heart-shaped chocolate was made into a size that could fir inside the drawstring bag.

And then Satoshi left the club room. He met Chitanda on the landing, and

probably gave some excuse like "Hey Chitanda, sorry for being late, I was too engrossed in something." Chitanda then brought Satoshi to the club room, only to discover that the chocolate was gone.

I wonder what Satoshi thought as he saw Chitanda become flustered?

We reached the middle of the bridge, and I stopped. Satoshi followed suit.

So that the wind wouldn't extinguish my voice again, I raised my voice quite a bit.

"Now we're even."

"Even?"

Satoshi answered with a faint laugh.

"For what favor? It's not that incident on New Year's Day, right? If I had to choose, I would say that I don't really care about this sort of thing."

"I'm talking about April last year. You created a story to help me escape from Chitanda[58]."

It took some time for Satoshi to remember. "Ah," he muttered.

"Oh yeah, that's right."

"At that time, you played along with my plan."

"Yeah, I suppose. I'm surprised that you actually remembered about that."

"Of course I would."

I clenched my teeth.

"That was a terrible thing to do. I did something stupid."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

I'm sure of it now thanks to today's events. I've been made to clearly realize the meaning of deceiving others with cowardly tricks. Unexpectedly, or

perhaps inevitably, the one who was deceived this time as well as last time was Chitanda.

"But that was a graceful story."

Satoshi said.

"When the energy-saver Houtarou realized his intentions, no one got hurt... except for Houtarou himself."

All of a sudden, the wind surged, causing the dancing snow to form eddies in the night sky. I adjusted the collar of my trench coat again. I cast my eyes down and asked,

"You could at least give an explanation, right?"

"An explanation, huh..."

I have no idea why Satoshi acted this way. But I thought that he would have a reason for doing so. You could say that I believed in him. That's why I came up with a fictitious deduction for Chitanda to accept, and acted to close the situation. On a day when I say something like "Because I felt doing it", it wouldn't be impossible for me to get mad. But because I wasn't asked, I kept silent. In the end, in order to convince Chitanda and get her to calm down, I had no choice but to make an absolutely unrelated student the scapegoat. There was probably a better method, but I couldn't find it. From now on, that girl will spend the rest of her school life with Chitanda's misunderstanding.

I did all that because I believed that Satoshi had a good reason for his actions. But what if...

"If you say you did it as a joke..."

"If I did?"

"Then I'll have to hit you. For Chitanda and Ibara as well. With my fist."

Satoshi shrugged in a exaggerated manner.

"I sure don't want to be hit."

"By the way, if you want to keep silent, you'll have to apologize to Chitanda, and while you're at it, tell her that it was your doing."

"That's even worse. I had no intention of getting Chitanda involved in the first place."

Satoshi looked up at the sky. A long breath escaped from his mouth.

After some silence, he slowly spoke.

"I really don't want to say it. It's not something I want to talk about. But I can't keep silent, can I?"

"I don't know what you were thinking. You didn't only think, but acted on it."

"That's right, it's exactly as you said. I don't regret it, I really don't, but..."

Satoshi's gaze fell from the heavens to the ground. As if he had resolved himself, he began speaking, albeit in a faltering tone. His voice wasn't very loud, but I could still hear him over the wind.

"Houtarou, do you think of me as the obsessive type?"

I thought for a while and answered.

"Yeah, I guess. You're also quite the hobbyist."

"That's where you're totally mistaken."

Satoshi leaned on the railing of the snow-filled bridge.

"Hobbyists and obsessive people devote themselves to something. They don't want to lose to anyone in their respective fields, and their daily lives entail study and discovery."

"Aren't you like that?"

"Nope. Have you forgotten the 'Empress' incident? I said that I couldn't be

number one at anything, didn't I? But to be precise, I've given up on reaching the top.

"You played a game with me earlier."

He was talking about the match we had at the game center. I won with a set count of 2-1.

"Yeah."

"At that time, didn't you think that something was weird? I wasn't obsessed with winning.

"We used to play that game a lot two years ago, yeah? The me back then looks like a pretty deplorable guy now. I used to win for the sake of winning. If I lost, I would quibble and find fault with the rules. It wasn't limited to games. When there was a guy who was well-informed about Takeda Shingen, I fished around for books so that I would know even more than that expert. At one point I also hopped on the train mania bandwagon. I simply wanted to win.

"I was obsessed with so many things. I can't remember what exactly I was into, but it could be anything, like the arrangement of colors on clothes, or the correct stroke order of kanji. Even when I went to a conveyor belt sushi bar, I would be engrossed in the correct order of assembling the sushi toppings, and I wouldn't notice the delicious food right under my nose."

Satoshi laughed at himself in an extremely strange fashion.

"To put it plainly, it was boring. Since I wanted to win so much, it wasn't interesting even if I did win, and I couldn't bear that end result. At that time, I couldn't understand why I felt that way, so I thought about it a lot. I was such an idiot. Would things be fun if I didn't have a fun way of winning?

"So, one day, I grew tired of it. I gave up on being obsessed. No, that's not it. I became obsessed with not being obsessed. I've forgotten the exact cause.

"And after that, Houtarou, every day was truly entertaining. Today would be cycling, tomorrow would be handicrafts, and then I would read up on the

US-Japan Security Treaty, postal life insurance, and classical music. With enough determination to spice it up but not so much as to be fixated on it, I dabbled in a variety of subjects. There was one time when you used the phrase 'shocking pink' to describe my lifestyle, right? That was a clever description."

Satoshi had already stopped directing his words at me. I caught his gaze, and continued his reminiscing monologue.

"But even in those comfortable days, one problem remained.

"I became obsessed with not being obsessed, and became at ease with this life. I don't have a clue how far your energy-saving belief supports your life, but my lack of obsession is quite a critical point for me. Without it, I would probably go back to being that pathetic guy.

"But then there's Mayaka."

I could sense Satoshi clenching his fists.

"Mayaka's great. You probably don't know how good she is, but she really is. There's no girl like her. If Mayaka said that she wanted to be with me, it would be like a dream.

"But then, would it be alright for me to be obsessed with Mayaka?

"I had decided to not be fixated on anything, but could Mayaka be an exception?

"I thought that it was a really simple thing. By doing whatever I wanted, I acquired my current level of comfort. And I really wanted to be with Mayaka, so I thought that I should perhaps just follow my wishes.

"But then, Houtarou, that was impossible. Absolutely impossible. Because I wanted, I didn't become obsessed with anything and because I wanted, I obsessed over Mayaka. .....Mayaka was a problem, but ignoring her would be a terrible policy. I should fix the situation, but how should I do it? Perhaps I'm mistaken in thinking that I can come up with the solution myself. With this Zen dialogue, I wonder if I've become a person who

cannot hurt Mayaka.

"While I was still searching for the answer, last year's Valentine's Day came. Don't you think that the Valentine chocolate could be taken to be a sort of symbol? If I accepted Mayaka's chocolate, it would be like announcing that I would obsess over her. And I hadn't even found my answer yet."

"So that's why you didn't accept it?"

"Yeah. It's the same for this year.

"You can call me a blockhead. It's been a year, and I still can't give an answer!

"In that situation, I wondered if there was any way to refuse the chocolate that I couldn't accept, other than making it disappear. If there was. .....Yeah, I guess there would be some merit in giving me a punch."

Silence fell.

But that was supposed to have nothing to do with Chitanda.

"But you hurt Chitanda."

I said, and Satoshi responded with a sorrowful smile.

" .....My plan didn't go as smoothly as yours, Houtarou. I had no idea it would turn out this way."

"Then how did you expect it to turn out?"

"We had an agreement. Mayaka would leave the chocolate in the club room. If I was ready to accept it, I would take it. If not, I would leave it there. With that promise, that was what I had planned to do. I'm not saying that Mayaka is at fault, but she didn't factor that into her calculations. That Chitanda, who helped her in making the chocolate, would want to see through the accepting of the chocolate..."

So it was a collaborative plan by Satoshi and Ibara?

"Then, have you told Mayaka all this?"

"Of course I have! Isn't it obvious? If not, I would be manipulating Mayaka under my own terms!

" .....Hmm, actually, that's exactly how it is.

"Last year, after I rejected Mayaka's chocolate, we had a talk. It was one that lasted a few hours and was even more detailed than the one we're having now. That sure takes me back. It's already been a year since then. I was scolded pretty harshly back then. In the end, Mayaka didn't say that she understood my situation, but said that she would wait. The next Valentine's Day would be a test.

"Mayaka still stayed calm even after she learned that he chocolate had been stolen, right? That's because she probably understood that it was a sign that the thief still hadn't been able to find his answer. That's what I think, anyway."

Ibara realized that Satoshi was the one who stole the chocolate. That's what I had expected. But then I thought that Ibara would be enraged about it afterwards. Since this year's chocolate was rejected like last year's. .....I didn't even know if that would be a reason for her to be angry.

If that's the case, Ibara's Manga Research Club business would probably be a lie as well.

Satoshi spread his hands out wide. His uniform sleeves were stirred up by the wind and fluttered around.

"So, Houtarou, that's all I have to say. My actions weren't just a practical joke, and I didn't keep quiet about it. What are you going to do?"

... The snowfall increased in intensity.

I straightened the collar of my coat. It was too cold to stay on the top of the bridge. As I walked, my feet made crunching noises on the snow.

Satoshi followed behind.

"I can't tell this to Chitanda, can I?"

"Definitely not. I would rather get punched."

That's what I thought. Even if Satoshi did speak frankly to Ibara regarding this topic, this would still be guys' talk. Likewise, Chitanda and Ibara would probably be having some girls' talk too. Since the contents of their discussion has not been leaked to me, and Satoshi hasn't told me everything yet, I, too, shouldn't reveal everything to Satoshi.

No, I wonder about that.

My motto is "If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick." That's all. I don't have anything that needs to be disclosed. I suddenly recalled what I was thinking about at the library while I was looking at the photograph collection. An energy conserver cannot deal with a love affair. The same goes for Satoshi's motive for breaking the hand-made chocolate. But the two things are falsely similar. I definitely made a mistake. Satoshi hesitated because of Ibara.

As I crossed the river where the cold winds blew fiercely, I felt troubled. Although he was the one at fault from the beginning, I've made him say something that he probably didn't want to. Should I make it up to him? Should I say to him, "Sorry, I guess I didn't know much about Fukube Satoshi"?

With my back facing Satoshi, I gave a small, bitter smile.

Well, guess I can't say that.

The bridge wasn't that long. Right before we reached the other side, I asked,

"So, is there the prospect that you'll be able to answer?"

I turned back to a serious face that cannot be seen under normal circumstances. Satoshi nodded slightly.

"I'm almost there, just a bit more..... I just can't put it into words yet."

I hit his shoulders.

"Sorry for making you say all this in the cold. I'll buy you a can of coffee."

With that, the usual smile returned to Satoshi's face. He swung his bag around, and I could hear the broken pieces of chocolate making cracking noises inside.

"All right. Since you're treating, I'll have a red tea, then."

Once I got home, I brewed some tea to warm up my cold body. After drinking half of it, I called Chitanda.

I told her that it ended uneventfully, that I handed the chocolate to Satoshi, and that any friction or future conflict had been completely cleared up. I wonder if Chitanda was happy with this. Not knowing how long her words of thanks would last, I forcefully stopped her and hung up.

I told a lie. Perhaps I've become defiant, but no one can blame me for what I've done.

I returned to my room, lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling.

Besides. .....it's not impossible for Chitanda to be lying to me. It's common knowledge today that there is more than one perspective to any topic. Anyhow, I don't totally understand Satoshi, who can be said to be an old friend of mine. Even if no one was lying, it's also possible that someone had a misunderstanding, or that the other person misconstrued their words.

In any case, it's impossible for Ibara to not realize that Chitanda would want to witness the accepting of the chocolate. Does Satoshi understand this?

That Ibara might have used Chitanda as a strategy to get Satoshi to accept the chocolate? Or could I be looking to much into it?

I don't know. Not that I tried to find out. If that Astronomy Club member, Nakayama really stole the chocolate with the physical trick I mentioned earlier, I wouldn't be spending my time staring at the ceiling like this.

A bar of chocolate lay on the floor. That was the single piece of Valentine chocolate I received this year.

I picked up the chocolate that seemed like it was made overseas, tore off its cover and peeled off the foil. I bit into the black chocolate that appeared from under the foil.

The taste of chocolate spread in my mouth. It was intensely sweet, then bitter, as I had expected. The taste gradually faded and disappeared, leaving only its impression.

7 - The Doll that Took a Detour

7.1

After passing through the downtown area of Kamiyama City and following the road to the northeast, I reached a long, gentle slope. The feet on the pedals of my bicycle grew heavy, but I didn't feel pain. The slope wasn't so severe that I had to stand up and pedal, but I could feel my body temperature rising.

Sparse forests appeared on both sides of the road, and I could start seeing the lingering snow on the ground. The signs of human presence suddenly died out, as if some kind of catastrophe had just occurred. Actually, looking from a historical perspective, the hilly area on the northeastern side of Kamiyama City used to be an independent village of a different name.

That's what I heard from Satoshi, at least. Even now, that area is known by its local name, Jinde. The incline of the slope increased for a short while. Although the indications of spring were getting stronger, it was still freezing in the morning. It was so cold that I could see my ragged, white breath escaping into the atmosphere.

I noticed a shrine at the apex of the hill. I've taken this road a few times already. The first time was with Satoshi showing me the way. The next time was when all four members of the Classics Club celebrated the end of the Cultural Festival. But this is the first time I've noticed the shrine here. It's probably because I've always walked on this road while there was some sort of disturbance, I suppose.

Today, I'm alone. Who would have thought that the Oreki Houtarou, who took up the self-appointed role as energy conserver, would wake up so early in the morning to cycle to a distant village? Thinking that this would have been impossible one year ago, I smiled bitterly. The deity in the shrine was the Kshitigarbha[59]. Taking a break, I got off my bicycle, and with one hand, paid my respects to the bodhisattva.

After the Kshitigarbha shrine was a downhill slope.

I could see speckles of snow in the rice paddies. The rays of the morning sun shot through the chilly atmosphere.

Since this hill wasn't so high, the view wasn't so good. However, in the middle of the expansive plains, out of the sporadically distributed houses, I could see an estate surrounded by a white fence of an unusual style. A majestic pine tree was growing in the garden of that estate. That would be Chitanda's house. You can tell that it's a large house from here, but you wouldn't know of the dumbfounding size of the reception hall and the infinite detail of the transom[60] without going inside.

But I wasn't going to Chitanda's house today. I turned my head around.

After the Chitanda residence was a brook that partitioned the land into two banks. A small temple was built on the other side, as if eating into the mountain that couldn't be merely described as having a fresh verdure. I couldn't see the main building. I only thought it was probably there because of the flag in front.

That's my destination. It's called Mizunashi shrine, I think.

It was two days ago.

As I was languidly lying on the bed in my room and reading a thick paperback book that just wouldn't end, the phone rang.

"Hello. Sorry for calling you during your break."

It was Chitanda. By nature, she has a polite demeanor and docile tone, but when we talk face to face, I get influenced by her large eyes and our past experiences, and I get made to realize that she's not just a trim person. However, I can't see her face over the phone, so I thought that I had received a call from some lady.

"I wasn't really taking a break."

"Eh? Oreki-san, you have supplementary lessons?"

"No, that's not it..."

My grades were certainly not the most outstanding in Kamiyama High School, but they weren't that bad for me to receive a notice to attend extra lessons. On the other end of the line, Chitanda spoke calmly.

"It's the spring holidays."

That's right. I was definitely taking a break from the spring holidays, without a care in the world.

"I apologize for being so sudden, but..."

Chitanda did seems really apologetic about it, so I held my breath, wondering what this was all about.
"Do you have any plans for the day after tomorrow?"

I glanced at the calendar. There were no plans for the day after tomorrow, the day after that, and in fact, the whole spring holidays. If my sister was around, she would drag me along somewhere, but thankfully, she's traveling in Nanki[61], leaving me at home in peace.

"Nope."

"I see. That's great."

I could sense clear relief from the other side. Then, Chitanda continued.

"Erm, Oreki-san. I understand that this is sudden and troubling, but could you please help me hold an umbrella?"

While holding the receiver, I tilted my head without thinking.

If this was April last year, I would have seriously been troubled about whether "holding an umbrella" was some sort of slang. However, I've known Chitanda for about a year. Based on experience, I've learned that Chitanda tends to gloss over the explanation when asking for a favor.

"...Explain from the beginning."

"From the beginning? Right. It all started from the postwar period..."

"Ah, I mean, explain from the middle, and in a way that I can understand."

It seems that even Chitanda had realized her habits. With an embarrassed voice, she said,

"Sorry, I'm bad with explanations..."

I could hear a muttered "Erm" from Chitanda. With that, it seemed that she had organized her thoughts.

"Basically, a shrine near my house is celebrating a Doll Festival. There's the emperor and empress, ministers and three court ladies. There used to be a five man ensemble, but because of the decrease in the number of children, it was removed."

"I see..."

I have absolutely no idea why declining birth rates would cause an ensemble to be omitted, but more importantly, there was a fundamental contradiction. The Doll Festival should be in March, but it's April now.

"Isn't it one month late?"

"Ah, right, that is to match the lunisolar calendar."

This statement made me want to ask something like "Is that so?" or "What about it?" Is a Doll Festival held one month late such a common phenomenon? Without caring about my questioning silence, Chitanda continued.

"The royal dolls have umbrella bearers, but... one person who has filled this role for many years suddenly dislocated his hand in an accident. I wouldn't ask the impossible, but we are do not have enough helpers. I've asked around for suitable people in my area, but none of them could make it.

"The costume has a specific size, so not everyone can wear it. For example,

it would be too large for Fukube-san, but I think that it will fit you perfectly."

Chitanda stopped talking for a moment. Then, she continued, as if she had been waiting for my response.

"It will take less than an hour. Could you please help out?"

I realized that my face had turned bitter.

Basically, all I have to do is to hold an umbrella next to the tiered doll stand. But to be honest, it would be troublesome, and no matter how eloquent Chitanda was, there's no doubt that I would feel embarrassed participating in a festival in an area I have no ties to.

"Not really interested."

"Ah, I see..."

An awkward silence followed.

But now that I think about it, no one would care about the person holding the umbrella. Moreover, Chitanda knows about my energy saving principle, and yet she asked for my help. That means that she's really troubled.

If I can quickly help Chitanda when she's in a pinch, well, that's not so bad.

"Ah, but it's fine. I'll go."

"Eh? Is it really alright?"

Based on the sudden change in her speech pattern, it seems that Chitanda was really surprised. After a deep breath, her well-mannered words returned.

"Thank you very much. You are a great help."

"So, the day after tomorrow, I just have to stand next to the dolls, right?"

"Yes, and you will be walking with them. It may not be much, but there will be a gift for your efforts."

Ah, I'll be getting a gift too. This would be just like a simple part-time job, then.

I was just about satisfied with Chitanda's explanation, when all of a sudden, I realized something. That can't be right.

"Walking with the dolls, you say?"

"...Yes."

"The dolls walk?"

"That's right."

She answered as if that was natural, but for some reason her voice became gradually softer. I was about to ask "Why would the dolls walk?", when Chitanda spoke up, as if unable to bear it any longer.

"They may be dolls, but please stop saying 'doll' over and over. I'm also quite embarrassed."

Something was off. Something was definitely off here. I thought for a while.

My job was just to hold an umbrella for a doll, but Chitanda said that the doll walks. Also, she felt shy upon hearing the word "doll".

There was only one conclusion that could be drawn.

"Don't tell me the doll is..."

"...Ah. Could it be that you do not know anything about it?"

Exactly as I had thought, huh.

After adjusting the receiver, Chitanda continued with a detailed explanation.

"Every year, following the lunisolar calendar, the Mizunashi Shrine celebrates the Doll Festival by having girls dress up as 'Live Dolls'. The dolls form a procession and parade around the village. I thought that

Mizunashi Shrine's Live Doll Festival was quite famous, so I thought that you would know about it...

"Yes, I have played the position of Empress every year since the start of middle school... Fukube-san said that he would come over to take a look."

But Satoshi had supplementary classes, so he just couldn't make it for the procession. He called last night, and he spoke in a voice that seemed like he was stomping on the ground in regret.

"Listen, Houtarou. You're holding an umbrella for Chitanda when she's playing an empress. Come what may, never, ever, make a mistake!"

I was more worried about what costume I would be put in, as the umbrella bearer behind the doll.

There was still some time before the arranged time, but I didn't want to get lost on an unfamiliar road. I adjusted my trench coat, and pedaled all the way down the slope.

7.2

Looking at the scenery from up here, I could see that the village was surrounded by mountains on all four sides. There were a few buildings, and probably because now wasn't the right season to plant anything, the fields contained only unmelted snow and some sparse leaves. I heard from Satoshi that lotus flowers would be grown after the rice crops had been harvested, and I laughed ambiguously, thinking that now would also be the time for Chitanda to grow[62]. Right now, I can't tell if the leaves in the rice fields were actually lotus plants.

I pedaled along the side of the brook, which had trees growing on its banks. The trees' leaves had fallen off in autumn last year, and the new buds hadn't appeared yet. Despite having no interest in the beauties of nature, even I would know what kind of trees these were, since they were of a major variety. They were cherry blossoms. The apricot plants had already bloomed in the shopping street in town. I'd thought that these would have bloomed already.

Since plants aren't industrially produced goods, they would occasionally have eccentricities in conduct. As I was moving upstream to cross the river, one cherry blossom tree with vibrant blossoms appeared before my very eyes. Not all the flowers had opened up, but while all the other trees were still in the reticence of winter, this one tree already had half of its blossoms. I guess it has something to do with exposure to sunlight. Seeing a solitary flowering tree sure was fascinating.

I stopped the bicycle. I was surprised by the wild bloom, but I wasn't here to admire the flowers. From my pocket I retrieved a memo, which contained Chitanda's instructions on how to get to Mizunashi Shrine.

"From the slope, go upstream along the brook and you will reach a cherry blossom blooming out of season. Cross Choukyuu Bridge ahead and follow the path."

So I should cross the first bridge after the cherry blossom. I hurried on.

I could sense the festival atmosphere. From the banners with family crests hanging down in vestibules. From the cheers of the walking children. From

the white flags in the distance. And most significantly, from myself being here riding my bicycle across the streets at nine in the morning when there was no school.

After rounding a curve, I finally saw a small bridge. That would be Choukyuu Bridge, I suppose. Matching its name[63], it was an extremely old bridge. Its width was narrow, and it didn't seem that cars could cross it.

But then...

My pedaling grew weaker.

"...Hm?"

Looking closer at the vicinity of the bridge, there was a standing notice board. Well, this is troubling. What was written on the board was "No crossing".

The bridge was undergoing some construction. Reading the contents of the notice board, I found that the deteriorating bridge was being reconstructed. Indeed, the completely blackened wood bridge looked unreliable, and the bare floorboards, which hadn't even been laid with asphalt, had probably remained there for a few generations.

Right now, the "No crossing" sign was standing, but it didn't seem like there was any work being done on the bridge, so I could cross if I really wanted to. However, there was a small truck on the other side, and there were two men in yellow helmets and yellow-grey overalls laying down some equipment that looked like metallic scaffolding. They were probably construction workers from the public works company... It would be really stupid to cross on my own accord and anger the two men. Thankfully, the bridge was only a few meters long. I called out to the workers on the other side.

"Excuse me!"

The worker that turned to look at me had a swarthy face that reminded me of summer even in this cold weather. He could have gotten the sunburn during his job, or perhaps he has an interest in skiing in winter. Fortunately,

he didn't seem to be a difficult person.

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Could I cross this bridge?"

"Sure, sure you can pass right now. Come along."

He waved his hand. Following his words, I pushed my bicycle and crossed Choukyuu Bridge. The floorboards creaked and bent under my feet as I passed. It would certainly be better for this bridge to be rebuilt as soon as possible.

After crossing the bridge, the worker placed his hand on his hip and smiled.

"We'll be starting work once another truck arrives, and you won't be able to cross after that."

"Okay, thanks."

That means that I would have to use another bridge downstream when I'm returning home. Well, I probably won't get lost.

With my back to Choukyuu Bridge, I suddenly felt that something was strange... Since Chitanda lives in this Jinde area, she should be aware of the bridge's reconstruction. It's strange that she would tell me to cross this bridge. And it definitely wouldn't be a prank.

Well, since I was able to pass in the end, I have no complaints. The shrine would be along the path, so I cycled further upstream.

Come to think of it, I got to see Chitanda in her kimono on New Year's Day. At that time, it was for a shrine visit, and today would be for a festival. I don't really believe in this sort of thing, but it's a weird link of fate.

Like its impression when viewed from afar, Mizunashi Shrine was built near the side of the mountain range. It was totally different in scale

compared to Arekusu Shrine, which I visited on New Year's Day. The archway was small, the stone staircase narrow, and the main building didn't seem to have a significant history; it was simply old. It's impossible to compare it to Arekusu Shrine, which is also a famous sightseeing destination, but the caretakers of Mizunashi Shrine were trying. A reconstruction schedule was pasted in front of the shrine, and there was also a notice board with the large words "Living Doll procession starts at 11:30".

I've never been inside a shrine office in my entire life, but this year, I've already done it twice. For some reason, I was a lot bolder during the second time. Naturally, it has nothing to do with the shrine offices of Arekusu Shrine and Mizunashi Shrine, but I supposed it's like being able to pass through the curtains of a Nagoya Don restaurant confidently after having been to a Osaka Don restaurant. Would this be considered "Taking revenge on your Edo enemies in Nagasaki"? In any case, I certainly wouldn't really feel dwarfed being in the middle of my elders wearing Happi coats[64].

The reception hall was a lot smaller compared to the one at Arekusu Shrine, but it was about twenty tatami mats in size. There, I approached a middle-aged man who behaved like a manager and asked him a question.

"So, what should I do?"

The procession would start at half past eleven, but we were supposed to assemble at half past nine. There was still some time before that, but I had nothing to do. The man, who had a red-tipped nosed, stared at me suspiciously.

"...And you are?"

He asked brusquely.

"My name is Oreki. I was asked to hold an umbrella."

"Haven't heard that name."

"Well, I'm not one of the people here."

"Fnnnn..."

I was stared at intently. Did the words get through? Having rushed here in the cold only to be treated like this, I was naturally sullen.

"Didn't you hear from Chitanda? I was told that the person who usually holds the umbrella had an injury, and I was asked to replace him."

Having confirmed my identity, the man's attitude suddenly changed.

"Ah! So you're Hazawa's replacement. I see. Why did you come so early? The mens' changing will be done soon, so it would have been better if you'd taken your time."

... If I had known, I would have spared no effort to move as slowly as possible. The man brought me to a kerosene stove as I was feeling disheartened and crestfallen at the beginning of my work.

"I'll take care of the arrangements. Until you're needed, please stay warm."

"Okay."

That's great. Having gotten permission, I put on my white trench coat and became a living statue by the stove, one of my most proficient actions. If it would be alright for my changing to be done slowly, then Chitanda would be changing from nine thirty onwards, I suppose.

Besides me, every other person in the room had their own things to do, and they were all running around with urgency. There would usually be four to five people gathered in the room, but when the man in the happi coat stomped in noisily, a few lines would be exchanged, and people would take turns leaving and entering the room. For example,

"Oi, who's in charge of the sake preparations?"

"That would be Nakatake-san. More importantly, what about later in the afternoon?"

"I left it to the women, but please confirm it."

And,

"Hanai-san! There's a call from a newspaper company!"

"Newspaper? It wouldn't be NHK, would it?"

"All they said was that they were from a newspaper company."

From that exchange, I learned that the man with the red nose was called Hanai-san.

For a moment, I was infected by the frantic energies in the noisy room, and I started looking forward to the job. There were a few people who would occasionally look at me suspiciously, as if saying, "Who's this guy not helping out? What's he doing?", but I wouldn't be afraid as long as I didn't make eye contact with them.

... I don't always choose the path of the energy saver no matter the reason. However, this time, there were clear, proper reasons for me to not move an inch from the stove.

Firstly, I don't know this place. I don't know anything about the interpersonal relationships or the festival arrangements. No one asked me to do anything, and I think I would just be a burden if I tried to butt in.

Second. It's warm in front of the stove.

Perhaps I had erased my existence by crouching, for most people passed by without looking at me. I was worried about going unnoticed until the Living Doll procession started, when the man from earlier, Hanai, stood up. He quickly asked,

"You're holding the umbrella for Chitanda-san, right?"

"That's what I heard."

"I see. I'm telling you just in case, but there's a mourning at Sono-san's place, so the route will be changed."

"Huh. That's unfortunate."

To that response, Hanai nodded lightly.

"It was a peaceful death. So, do you want to know the new route?"

"No."

"Then you'll be fine if you always follow the person in front of you. The route will be somewhat shorter."

Having said everything that he had to, Hanai stood up and left in a hurry. In any case, if I were to just follow Chitanda, there wouldn't be any point in knowing of the change in route. If Hanai hadn't told me about it, I would have just gone past without knowing of Sono's misfortune. It seems that Sono had reached the end of the natural span of life, and I silently prayed for him or her.

The sound of heavy feet stomping around for preparation of the event wouldn't stop.

"The number of clogs don't add up! What happened to the women's Zori[65]]?"

"Are you missing one or two?"

"One pair."

"Then it would be Chitanda-san's. She brought her own."

Would I be wearing a Zori too? If that's the case, would I have to wear a Tabi[66]? What I'm wearing now is normal socks that's tightly guarding my feet from the cold. That would be fine, right?

... Obviously not. It seems that I had been swallowed by the frenzied atmosphere, for I simply couldn't calm down. It's all right, I just have to check with Chitanda. There's nothing for me to care about.

But then again, I don't think our communication will be flawless. I'm feeling uneasy.

As time passed, the number of people bursting into the room with weird

expressions on their faces increased. A withered, old man with a head of white hair walked into the room and shouted in such a loud voice that I wondered where it came from.

"Nakatake! What did you do about the sake?"

A man huddling in the corner stood up sluggishly. He was a thickly-built man who looked a little slow-witted, but had a lot of strength.

"I have ordered it. They will deliver it in the afternoon."

"By afternoon, what time did they mean?"

"By one o'clock."

"You fool!"

A thunderous voice sounded. Even though I was on the other side of the room, my body shook in shock.

"The procession returns at twelve thirty, one o'clock is too late! That's why I told you to always leave a buffer, now hurry up and push it forward!"

The person in charge of the sake didn't seem to accept it, but he quickly answered, "I'll do it now." and left the room. The white-haired man now stared at the room, and I accidentally made eye contact with him. "Oh," he muttered, and with that same austere face, rapidly moved over to where I was crouching. Bending his vigorous body a little, the old man spoke.

"Are you the person Chitanda-san asked to help?"

How did he manage to release so much intensity? I was thinking of saying "No, you've got the wrong person." and making a run for it, but I can't do that.

"That's right."

I couldn't say anything else. My half-kneel had turned into a Seiza[67] without me realizing.

In response, the old man lowered his head.

"Sorry for making you come all the way to this place. We don't have enough manpower, so we've been causing quite a bit of trouble for outsiders such as yourself. I hope you will forgive us."

I reflexively removed my trench coat and stood up.

"Not at all! I'm sorry I can't be of much use as an outsider. I'll try my best not to get in the way. If there is anything you need of me, please don't hesitate to ask."

The elderly man raised his head, and his eyes narrowed.

"You've got your act together."

... That's the first time anyone has said that to me.
"Relax until your time comes," he added, and with one more bow, he left the room. It somehow seems that I was officially allowed to relax.

However, that's just not sold in the wholesale store[68].

I heard this conversation from the men entering and leaving the room.

"Did you take care of Choukyuu Bridge?"

That was the red-nosed Hanai. The person who answered was one of the firmly built men in the Happi coats, a relatively tall and gangly man.

"I asked Murai-sensei to take care of it."

"You left it to Murai-san?"

Hanai's words ended with a slightly bitter tone, which the tall man noticed.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, well, fine, I suppose. Did they delay the construction work?"

"He said it was perfectly fine, and that he would have construction stop on the day of the Doll Festival even if the completion date would be delayed."

Since I was an outsider, it wasn't my problem, and I could have just stayed silent. Why didn't I do that? I have no idea myself. In any case, I moved my lips while in the position of warming my body by the stove.

"Construction has already started on Choukyuu Bridge."

That line led to an unexpectedly enormous effect. Hanai and the man he was talking to, as well as the elderly man and the guy who was scolded regarding the sake, or in fact, everyone in the room turned to look at me in unison.
Even I knew that this was important. Hanai's eyes looked like they would pop out of their sockets.

"What did you say?"

And then he was temporarily lost for words. He then yelled at the tall man.

"Shige! Did you confirm the delay?"

The man called Shige was flustered.

"I emphasized it to Murai-sensei! But he told me he would do it, and we can't contact the engineering firm from here!"

"You."

This time his words were directed at me.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

He drew closer. Being talked to like that makes me uneasy.

"When I was coming over here, there was a 'No crossing' sign at the bridge. Since the workers were there, I asked if I could pass and was allowed to do so."

"So they only placed the sign there?"

"Yes... but they said that they would start work after one more truck arrived."

The room's state of commotion, suddenly descended into a hush. Perhaps it came from the kitchen, but a shrill noise entered my ears.

The white-haired old man spoke.

"Sono-kun, take your truck there and check. Tanimoto, call Murai... no, call the Nakagawa Construction Agency."

It seems that the tall man was called Tanimoto Shige. I'm not sure if it's "Shigeru" or "Shigejirou"[69], though. Accepting the proposal, Hanai nodded.

"Ah, please do that."

And then he glared at me for some reason, as if I would be lynched if it was actually possible to cross Choukyuu Bridge.

... But my worries were all for naught. Ten minutes passed.

The man called Sono was a corpulent man whose Happi coat looked like it was close to bursting. He looked out of breath when returning to the room, but he reported in a loud voice,

"It's true! Construction has started!"

I could guess why that was so significant. The procession's course probably included crossing the bridge.

"Shige! It's all your fault!"

Tanimoto also had something to say. While cowering from Hanai's intensity, he spoke clearly.

"But something's wrong here. Murai-sensei definitely called Nakagawa Construction Agency to stop work on the day of the festival!"

"Then..."

"Apparently someone told them the day before yesterday that they could proceed on schedule."

Sono stood in to help the sweating Tanimoto.

"It's as Shige said. I just spoke with someone from the agency, and that's exactly what they said."

"Why did this happen..." I could hear someone sigh and mutter.

Since the atmosphere in the room had turned solemn, I somehow felt like running away. Should I raise an eyebrow? Unfortunately, my troubled face was unable to do that, even though I had nothing to worry about. All I could do was watch the development blankly.

The one who made the practical judgment was, once again, the white-haired old man.

"We shouldn't care about the agency for now. There might have been some miscommunication along the way. What's most important question now is what to do about the route."

A round clock without any form of civility stood on the lintel, inconsiderately telling us that it would soon be half past ten.

The original route was exceedingly simple.

From the road in front of the shrine, we would go downstream along the river. After that, we were supposed to cross Choukyuu Bridge and change direction, moving upstream. In the vicinity of the shrine, there is another bridge called Kaya Bridge, and we were supposed to cross that and return to the shrine. That's all.

However, Choukyuu Bridge is unusable now.

Receiving word of an emergency situation, the men who had dispersed for preparations earlier returned to the room. The spacious waiting room soon became a cramped meeting room. I could no longer sit by the stove blankly, so I removed my trench coat once again, and sat properly and silently at a corner of the room. Since it seemed that they were about to talk about things that an outsider like me wouldn't have any relation to, I wanted to leave the room, but I sadly missed the timing.

Someone started the ball rolling.

"Is it possible to somehow stop the construction? The procession could cross the bridge in five minutes."

If that was indeed possible, there wouldn't be a need for a discussion. Hanai shook his head.

"Besides the procession, there will also be journalists and cameramen, and if anyone gets hurt while crossing the bridge, the construction agency would take the blame. Since they've started work already, we won't ask them for the impossible. To prevent this situation, we had actually asked them to make the necessary arrangements, but..."

He looked around slightly as he spoke. Mr Tanimoto must be around here somewhere.

"There's no helping it. How about we go past Choukyuu Bridge, then return?"

As Hanai spoke while rubbing his chin, angry voices flew out from all directions.

"We can't do that!"

"Go back the way we came?"

"That takes care of the east side, but what about the west, no dolls for them?"

I could vaguely grasp the situation. The east and west areas of the brook worked together for the festival, but having the procession move on only

one side would definitely make some people furious.

Accepting the rebuttal, Hanai brought out another proposal.

"Then what about going past Choukyuu Bridge, returning, then getting to the west bank using Kaya Bridge, then going past Choukyuu Bridge again, and then going back?"

Going and returning twice, huh? That's a way to do it, but...
This time, only one man openly gave his counter-argument. He wasn't in the room earlier.

"That would make the time taken double. That also doubles the walking distance."

"There's nothing else we can do."

"Is there really nothing else? This would throw our plans into disarray. Furthermore, the TV crew are coming, so we can't do something embarrassing like that."

Another man entered the conversation.

"Also, the dolls already have to exert quite a lot of physical energy. Doubling the distance would be terrible."

What a brilliant opinion! I don't know how heavy an umbrella would weigh, but I don't want to walk double the distance.

Having been made to look like a bad guy, Hanai's whole face became shaded with the color of his nose.

"You may say all that, but what in the world could we do? Anything else?"

"We could go all the way to Tooji Bridge."

A young man said.

"If we cross Tooji Bridge and go back by Kaya Bridge, the distance wouldn't be doubled, right?"

From the flow of the conversation, I presume that there is apparently another bridge further downstream from Choukyuu Bridge. Was there really another bridge when I walked along the river? Well, it was probably there, but I just don't remember because it wasn't of interest to me at that time.

However, when that idea was proposed, Hanai grimaced and did not say a word. It wasn't just Hanai. There was some sort of awkward atmosphere in the room.

There was hardly any time before the start of the procession. Is there anyone who can break this stasis!

I'm not sure about the inactivity, but the silence was soon broken. I was wondering if someone accidentally opened the sliding door, when a plump middle-aged woman entered and spoke with a puzzled voice.

"Excuse me... Sorry for troubling you when you are busy, but is there someone called Oreki-san here?"

"Ah, yes."

I straightened my knees and stood up.

"That would be me."

The woman looked at me with an increasingly baffled expression. I have the feeling that I gave off the impression of an impolite person.

"What is it?"

"Ah... Chitanda-san's daughter is looking for you. She wants you to come over."

Chitanda?

Were they waiting for the intruder to leave? I hurriedly left the room with the heavy atmosphere where everyone shut their mouth. I don't know what business Chitanda has with me, but I sure was glad to be called out.

7.3

But I wasn't allowed to look at Chitanda directly.

I was in a room which was about the size of the waiting room where the men were discussing the plan of action. Since there were more kerosene stoves, it was warmer here. A thick curtain-like cloth was hanging in the room, and I couldn't see if there was anyone, or how many people there were, behind it. I felt that I shouldn't even try to look. The room was suffused with the smell of kerosene, as well as the fragrance of cosmetics.

A quiet voice came from behind the sheet.

"Are you there, Oreki-san?"

That was Chitanda's voice, I think. There's no other voice like that.

But for a moment, I hesitated. Chitanda has often used this calm voice. I've heard it many times, but the voice coming from behind the cloth seemed more prim, and somewhat colder. This voice seemed to portray formal, ordered behavior.

"Sorry we have to talk like this. I'm being dressed right now."

I had been thinking about the meaning of that sheet, and my guess was confirmed... this is the female changing room. I vaguely responded with an "Ah" and a "Oh". The discomfort I felt here made the solemn meeting room earlier seem like a siesta room. I adjusted my trench coat, which had fallen off my shoulders.

"I've called you for only one reason. There has been some trouble, right?"

"... Yeah."

"Is it serious?"

"Seems so."

"I see."

The voice cut off for a short moment. Was Chitanda the only person behind the curtain? That shouldn't be the case, right? The procession does not consist of only Chitanda, after all. I don't know what they're wearing, but for things like these, it's usually impossible for one to wear them alone. I said nothing. After a while, Chitanda spoke up again.

"Then please tell me what happened. There isn't much time left."

That was true. If we were setting off at eleven thirty, I would have to change soon. I get the urgency, and I understand why Chitanda wants to deal with the situation. She called me instead of any other guy probably because I would be easier to talk to, with us being the same age.

But then again.

If we were talking without seeing each others' faces, then it would be like our usual telephone calls, but this time, I somehow felt a little tongue-tied. Perhaps it was because I suddenly moved from a cold place to a warm one.

It's alright. It's not something you can't talk about. I wet my tongue and began to talk.

"At Choukyuu Bridge..."

Construction has started.

That construction was initially arranged to be stopped.

But then the construction agency received word that it was fine to continue.

As a result, it became impossible to use Choukyuu Bridge, and the men started discussing the serious topic of how to change the route. I summarized the above things and said it much too hurriedly.

I didn't even hear a cough from behind the sheet. It would have been good to hear some sounds of comprehension, too. I guess it's possible that Chitanda was making those sounds, just that they couldn't get past the thick cloth. I have no idea how she's listening to my words. She could be sitting properly, listening to me as she has her hair combed, or perhaps she's

listening while doing a headstand... more importantly, is she even listening?

I suddenly felt a little unsure, so I stopped my speech and asked.

"Someone suggested going through Tooji Bridge, but... are you listening?"

She responded quickly.

"Yes, I am."

Her reply wasn't just curt, it was with a coldness I hadn't experienced before. It was as if she was holding a fan to her mouth. I could imagine her leaning against an arm while stifling a yawn. I sighed, spoke of the awkward atmosphere among the men, and ended my explanation.

I closed my mouth, and the only thing I could hear in the room was the soft sound of kerosene combustion from the stoves.

... No, that's not all.

I strained my ears and heard it. A suppressed, whispering voice. It sounded like someone was talking to someone else. Was Chitanda speaking? Or was it the other person here who hadn't said a word to me before?

And then, the evaluation came.

"You summarized what was happening very well."

Well, thanks.

But her next words were a little different from before. I felt her take a deep breath, and then she spoke in a louder voice.

"Murai-san is a member of the Kamiyama City Council. Delaying the completion date might be just a figure of speech, but it would be difficult for the Nakagawa Engineering Firm to refuse if negotiations went through Murai-san. That means that we should believe that the phone call telling them to continue work today was real."

Her words were mixed with a feeling that I was used to hearing. It was a

burning enthusiasm that always existed underneath that neat appearance. When I hear the name Chitanda, I would be reminded of the beginning. Since we first met in April last year, she's gotten me, Satoshi and Ibara involved in many cases. She's a person overflowing with curiosity.

That means that Chitanda's holding no fan. She just wanted to find out who did this and why. She might even be as close to the hanging sheet as possible. Yawning would be unthinkable. There's no doubt that her enormous eyes are filled with energy. That's just Chitanda.

"Why would they..."

Behind the cloth, Chitanda became curious.

But that was all there was to it.

I had caught a glimpse of her excitement, but then it suddenly faded away, as if it hadn't existed in the first place.

While I was sitting properly on the tatami, what Chitanda said to me was not, "I'm curious." Instead, she said,

"But it's fine. It seems that the problem is not that severe."

There were two things I wanted to say, but I just couldn't reply to that. The first was, "Is that all?", but I naturally couldn't say that. I cleared my throat, and asked,

"Is that so? It seems quite serious in the other room."

"That might be the case, but there isn't a lack of a solution. To put it simply, we are hesitant to go to the area further downstream for religious matters."

She said this as if she was giving a lecture. I wasn't really that interested, but I somehow felt like saying, "Could you give a more detailed explanation?"

She thought for a while.

"Oreki-san, could you please bring the men a message?"

"Mm. Sure."

"Then..."
She started with a voice tinged with fortitude.

"I'll ask the other side's priest myself. I'll ask my father to contact the representatives personally, too. Please tell them that."

I momentarily wondered if Chitanda's bad habit was at work again. The message does seem a little short on words, after all. When Chitanda asks for help, she tends to gloss over the explanation, but if I point it out to her, she would carefully and properly supplement it.

But this time, even when I asked, "Is that all?", all that came from the other side of the hanging sheet were a few cold, dry words.

"They should understand."

And that's all I told them.

I returned to the mens' room, and conveyed the message while thinking that the room was really cold. I hadn't even finished speaking when Hanai showed an openly relieved expression.

"Ah, then let's leave it to her... Okay, people, we'll be using Tooji Bridge."

It seems that the route was decided while I was still trying to understand what was going on.

Now was a Sturm und Drang[70] with no room for doubts. There was hardly any time left before the procession would start, after all.

7.4

My changing progressed at a frenetic pitch.

The spring sun spread its rays outside. The sweatshirt I had worn here was taken off, and of course, I couldn't wear the trench coat either. On top of my underwear, I was made to wear a Haori[71]and something like a Hakama[72]. This outfit had long enough sleeves, but the cuffs were too high. A third of my shin could be seen.

"This doesn't really fit."

I told the person who was helping me change. I was called because I would fit the size of clothes, but that isn't the case. However, my helper, who seemed to have not yet reached twenty years of age, smiled and replied,

"That's how it is."

"Is that so?"

My feet are cold. This reminds me of the incident on New Year's Day. It seems that when you add "Chitanda" and "traditional clothes", the result would automatically become "cold".

"It's the best fit. If the cuffs were a little longer, I would be the one holding the umbrella."

The man said. He was indeed a lot taller than me. His hair was dyed bright brown, and he looked like an unconstrained older brother. But if there was a young person here, Chitanda wouldn't need to call me for help. The thought that we would have to depart soon turned into a nervousness I hadn't felt before, and I grumbled a little.

"If it's just the cuffs, it would have been better if you did it."

The man shrugged while passing me a pair of black Tabi.

"You don't often get to see a procession like this, so I purposely came back home. If I were in it, I wouldn't be able to watch."

Well, it's certainly true that I would mostly be watching Chitanda's back.

I don't really like these clothes, but I have a psychological opposition against wearing a Tabi that someone else has used. However, I couldn't resist this time. I put it on with great reluctance.

With that, I had finished wearing a black top, black trousers, and black socks. As I thought, my exposed shins does seem quite indecent.

"Right, next is this."

He handed me some white overalls.

"Wear this, and I'll tie it around your waist."

Just as he said, he tied the cord around with a butterfly knot.

There was some rubber in the cuff, and it was tightened. The sleeves were quite loose, and I could see the black clothing underneath. There was a slit on the side from the waist to the knees, where I could see the pleats of the Hakama. The front part of the overalls was flat and collarless, but around my neck, a black collar could be seen, forming a black and white layered costume.

I see, so even the packhorse can look good with clothes[73], huh? I'm starting to look like someone related to the festival.

"Next, wear this on your head."

The man passed me a black hat which looked like a cylinder crushed from the side. It's a kind of Eboshi[74], I suppose.

I have a bad feeling about this. Everything before this has been fine. But if I put it on...

I tried it.

My whole body was reflected in the mirror. The man looked fixedly at my image and muttered,

"It doesn't really suit you."

My thoughts exactly.

Whether Oreki Houtarou looks good in traditional clothing or not, the festival was about to begin.

It seems that the problem with the bridge was fixed, but the start time was to be delayed. It was said that the procession would start fifteen minutes later than the original time.

I exited from the back door. It seems that the dolls were going to go out from the front door and gather in front of the shrine. That wouldn't be my turn yet. It's only when the gathered dolls line up when I nonchalantly join them, and go behind Chitanda.

Right. The preparations were perfect.

As I felt uncomfortable from wearing a Tabi I wasn't used to, I walked down the corridor of the shrine office and towards the exit. I wore the provided Zori. I would be walking in these for an hour, or even longer since the route was changed. I loitered by the main entrance, but it wasn't because I hurt myself by scraping on something. My footwear wasn't very comfortable, but I think I can endure it.

As I exited the shrine office, I noticed a man whose Happi coat looked as if it was falling off. The man, whom I think was called Sono, was holding the umbrella and waiting for me. It had purplish red paper stuck on it, and was larger than I had expected. It opened at a larger angle compared to a western-style umbrella, and looked like a T shape, so it would look really big. As I faltered, Sono spoke to encourage me.

"Hey, the Living Doll Festival isn't one to strain yourself over. Try to make yourself at ease."

"You're saying that there are other festivals?"

"That's right. There are quite a few other spring festivals."

"Is that so? That must be really troublesome," I thought as I accepted the

umbrella... It may look big, but it's not particularly heavy. It's just slightly heavier than a cloth umbrella. I'll be supporting this with both hands, so I should be able to easily hold out for an hour.

Fuu, I took a deep breath. Sono asked,

"You nervous?"

...Just a bit.

And then the living dolls gathered.

First was the emperor. He was also wearing an Eboshi, but unlike mine, it had some sort decoration like a long tail behind. He was also completely in black, except of his white footwear, which were peeking out from under his costume. Naturally, his outfit was one suited for royalty, but what was interesting was his clothes. It was black, but it wasn't absolutely black. Instead, a pattern of a subtle shade of black was stitched on it. I couldn't see the exact pattern from far, but in a flash, I realized that it looked like stripes. The emperor was played by an aesthetically beautiful man with an imposing face.

That's what I thought, but it was a huge mistake. I couldn't believe my own eyes. That wasn't a man, all the dolls were played by women. And I recognize that emperor's face. Those sharp eyes, and that shallow chin line. She can't fool me by just pushing her hair up. That was a second year from Kamiyama High School - Irisu Fuyumi!

My relationship with Irisu goes back to the Cultural Festival, where we helped each other. I don't know much about her, but I at least know that Irisu's family doesn't stay around here. Was she also recruited as an outsider, like me? Irisu looked straight ahead, without even a hint of embarrassment. Since she didn't look around, I wasn't noticed.

Next was the empress.

So many people had gathered in front of the shrine that it made me wonder where they all came from. Perhaps some of them were visitors from outside

Kamiyama City. It seems that the Living Doll Festival was an unexpectedly effective method of drawing tourists. No wonder Chitanda mentioned that it was "quite famous".

The human crowd that blanketed the whole shrine grounds stirred, holding up their numerous cameras. If we weren't in the middle of the blinding spring sun, we would have undoubtedly been treated to a never-ending slew of camera flashes. The emperor in a doll collection would be wearing black royal clothes, so that was what Irisu was wearing. What would the empress wear, then?

Chitanda came out wearing a twelve-layered kimono.

The outermost layer was orange. The next layers were peach, pale blue-green, a calm, elegant shade of yellow, and white. There was a ring pattern on the kimono, and a fan made of five colors of string had been gently placed on the doll's hands. Chitanda stepped out into the grounds with her heavy make-up and downcast eyes. From just a few steps, I could tell that Chitanda had mastered the art of walking beautifully in those clothes.

"Ah", I thought.

This isn't good. This isn't a good costume. Crap, I should never have come here.

That means that, in other words, what does it mean?

In other words...

I've always taken pride in my relative proficiency at the Japanese language.

Additionally, while I may not be absolutely logical at times, I've always believed that I was the type to use reason to organize my thoughts.

However, that day, on the grounds of Kamiyama City's Mizunashi Shrine, on a spring day, at approximately 11:45 AM, at the moment when I saw Chitanda walking in her twelve-layered kimono...

I have no good words to explain why I thought the word "crap".

I've considered many reasons, but none of them can explain it well. If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick. This energy-saving principle was being fatally jeopardized. I have no way of explaining why I had that premonition.

I just kept earnestly thinking, "Crap, this isn't good at all."

Behind Chitanda's kimono was a long filet[75], with two women in traditional clothes holding it up so that it wouldn't touch the ground. Long hair drooped down Chitanda's back, tied into a bundle with golden paper. A person who doesn't know Chitanda would probably think that the girl in the twelve-layered kimono has really long hair, but I know that Chitanda's hair isn't that long. That's just a wig.

After that, the Ministers on the Left and Right appeared, along with the three court ladies. Sadly, I didn't take a look at any of them.

I realized that I had to hold the purplish red umbrella for Chitanda, and I joined the gracefully advancing procession. The order was Irisu, Chitanda, the two women holding Chitanda's filet, and then me.

As we walked along the narrow pathway, I was thinking about the filet being in the way... I couldn't see Chitanda.

It seems that besides the tourists, there were quite a few news companies here too. I noticed a gigantic lens on a tripod being aimed at us. As we proceeded a little further, I saw some other cameras lying in wait. If some cause for applause transpired, it would probably be shown on TV, and I thought that I would get really nervous. However, when I was actually in front of the camera, that never happened. I hardly noticed anything different.

But I guess the reason for that would be that I'm just a part of the background, and not a main character.

The procession was longer than I had thought. A troupe of men wrapped in uniforms followed behind, playing their transverse flutes. I didn't see them

directly, but since I heard some "Don, don" sounds mixed in, I presume that there are a few people with Taikos there, too.

We headed downhill on the path parallel to the river that I had cycled up. In the morning, it was freezing even with my trench coat, but now the calm light from the sun was pleasant. Even though it was just a small river, a breeze blew over its surface, and since it was only April, it was actually quite cold, although that definitely wasn't an unpleasant thing.

Tourists were lined up in two rows on the left and right of the narrow path. I've never been seen by so many people like this in my life. But then again, I don't think anyone would really look at the boy holding an umbrella at the back of the dolls. I looked forward for just a while.

We had passed the problematic Choukyuu Bridge and were heading to Tooji Bridge before I even knew it. I only realized it when the procession went over the water.

Suddenly, my vision was filled with pink, and I looked up.

Chitanda was walking under the flowering cherry blossom tree. We walked past half-opened and fully-opened flowers, but under the out of season flowers, Chitanda advanced silently with her twelve-layered kimono. The warm, gentle sunlight, the tiled room of and old house that happened to be built there by chance, the leftover snow on the rice fields, the transparent surface of the creek that had melted snow in it, and the murmuring of the stream. There was nothing unsightly about any of these things. At least, that's what I felt.

However, all I could see of Chitanda, with her flowing hair and her filet that was being held up, was her back.

I can't say that I hold any affinity to the curiousness that Chitanda repeatedly embraces. But this time, I thought, "Is this what Chitanda has always felt." Right now, I wanted to see Chitanda's expression. Now, in this place, if I could see her face-to-face with her rouged, downcast eyes, how would that be...

"Houtarou!"

A voice called. Taken aback, I turned around.

I saw that Satoshi was in the audience.

I turned back to look in front, with a nonchalant expression on my face.

7.5

The sake was delivered late, but thanks to the altered route, it arrived just in time. On returning to the shrine, the procession was greeted with a hot meal and warmed sake. There were a few obstacles along the way, but it ended without any problems, and all that was left was the night festival. The afternoon meal was extremely calm and full of smiles.

Chitanda and the rest of the dolls did not take their lunch, and instead went to the prayer hall. They're cleansing their impurities, I think.

Dolls are, by nature, things that accept the sins of man. Something has to be done about the accumulated impurities. I don't know when Mizunashi Shrine started the Living Doll Festival, but it has humans take on the role of dolls, so this is a pretty strange ritual. You could even call it dangerous if you consider the incantations involved. It's definitely not meaningless for the living dolls to undergo cleansing immediately after returning.

The person who said all that was the one who knows all unnecessary pieces of information, Fukube Satoshi. .....not. It was actually Ibara who gave that monologue. I had changed to my normal clothes, worn my trench coat, and was now eating Mitarashi Dango in a corner of the shrine grounds together with Ibara and Satoshi. I never knew that Ibara could give us so many details about the mystic practices, though.

Satoshi's words, on the other hand, was of a different matter.

"That was miraculous, Houtarou."

"The fact that you made it for the festival?"

"Ah, yeah, that's also unbelievable. I never thought that the festival would be pushed back."

It seems that he hopped onto his bicycle right after his remedial lessons ended, rushed here at full speed and caught up with the procession at the second half of Tooji Bridge. He thrust his hand into his linen drawstring bag and retrieved a disposable camera.

"My equipment was quite inferior, but it's way better than not taking a

picture at all. That was a one in ten thousand opportunity, so it was worthwhile using this thing. I was horrified at letting this chance go to waste, and if I hadn't taken a photo, I would be stomping on the ground in disgust."

"So did you take it?"

"It was a perfect shot, with the cherry blossom in it."

I stayed silent. Satoshi grinned and added,

"Based on your type, you just can't bear to say something like 'Make me a copy for commemoration's sake', right? But don't worry, I'll give you one even if you don't say it."

"You didn't suit your outfit at all."

Ibara just had to say the line that didn't need to be spoken.

In the end, I didn't manage to see Chitanda at Mizunashi Shrine. I don't know when the purification ritual ended, but the tourists evaporated after the festival ended, and Satoshi and Ibara didn't feel like staying any longer. "Say hi to Chitanda for me!" Satoshi called as he retreated from the shrine.

As for me, not knowing how long I should act like an involved person for, I had lunch and proactively helped with the cleaning up. The men who weren't free had left already but there were ten people who stayed until the end, so we swallowed the remaining fish and vegetables while having a lively conversation.

I only met Chitanda when the sun was leaning towards the west. I was passing by her house when I spotted Chitanda on her veranda, and she beckoned for me to come in.

I was waiting patiently at the guest room, but I left to go to the toilet. On the way back, we walked into each other.

"Ah, Oreki-san. I was just coming to greet you."

The Chitanda who was smiling in front of me had removed her make-up. She was the usual Chitanda. I had never stared at her so fixedly before, but now I understood. This was the Chitanda that I was used to seeing. She had taken off her twelve-layered kimono and was now wearing a collared shirt and a skirt with a gentle color, which was very suitable as indoor clothes. She could appear in front of people in this.

While I was looking at her, Chitanda's cheeks swelled.

"Wh-what is it?"

Chitanda sighed, and then shouted excitedly.

"Oreki-san!"

"....."

"Today was terrible! I had to control myself for so long! If I may say so, I think I did quite well just for today."

"Ah, playing the doll?"
But that wasn't it. Chitanda shook her head and took a step forward. The polished veranda floor creaked.

"That was not what I was controlling myself for. It was definitely..."

Chitanda put her hands on her chest, and spoke with her heart.

"About who called the Nakagawa Construction Agency. I've been curious for such a long time!"

...So that was it.

"Oreki-san, you probably understood something in that room, but I just couldn't ask. That was what I thought, but I felt that there was something on the tip of your tongue when you were talking behind the sheet."

"No, that wasn't it."

"Then what were you about to say?"

I never thought that I would be asked about that.

"I thought about it a lot! Who would benefit the most if Choukyuu Bridge could not be passed? But I had a job to do today, so I couldn't spend my time only thinking about it, but there was no one I could turn to..."

Her expression did not change much, but I could sense her regret. There was no hanging barrier on the veranda. As a result, Chitanda's eyes, the representation of her curiosity, drew closer.

"Oreki-san, you were in the office the whole time. Did you notice anything?"

"Not at all," was what I would like to say.

But I actually did notice something. Normally, I wouldn't spare a thought about what happened with the bridge, but today, in view of the special incident, I thought that Chitanda would be interested. Therefore, I listened carefully to what everyone said.

Since she didn't say "I'm curious!" in that room, I thought it was over then. I never knew that I would be brought to Chitanda's house in the evening.

I took half a step back and answered.

"Yeah... there were so many people today, though. Honestly, I don't know all their names."

"I know all of them, I think."

"Do you think any of them as suspicious?"

I asked. Chitanda's eyes, which had been blazing with curiosity up till now, opened wide in surprise.

"Eh? You're asking me?"

She said while pointing at herself. Come to think of it, I've been seeing that

action quite a lot lately. She tilted her head and thought for a while.

"...Yes, I do not have evidence, but there is in fact one person I think may have done it."

"I can also only think of one person who knew everything from the beginning."

Chitanda slipped out a chuckle.

"Then how about this? We write it out on something and show each other at the same time."

Write it on something? There's no pen or paper here.

But Chitanda wouldn't suggest the impossible. She reached into a skirt pocket and retrieved a pen.

"I have a pen here."

"Why would you have one?"
"I was writing out a name and address at the post office earlier. It should be able to write."

"What do we write it on?"

Chitanda frowned worriedly for just a while, but she quickly came up with a solution.

"We could write it on our hands."

...Well, I don't mind, but don't you have to attend a banquet later?

Chitanda removed the cap and drove the pen on her white hand without hesitation. Once she was done, she spun the pen around.

"Here, Oreki-san."

Since I had no choice, I wrote. My left hand felt ticklish, so I had to desperately suppress a weird laugh that was coming out. Because of that, I

might have caused my face to contort with a weird expression.

We held our fists together. Since the storm shutter of the veranda was open, we could have been peeked at from outside. But it should be fine. The Chitanda family's house was large, and had a high fence.

"On the count of two... One, two!"

On Chitanda's left hand was the words "Konari-san's son".

On mine was "Brown hair".

Chitanda compared the two palms fixedly. She gave a small nod, indicating her satisfaction.

"Konari-san's son has brown hair."

She said.

"At first, I thought that the man called Sono was a little strange. I heard that his family was in mourning, but he still came to help for the festival."

"Ah, Sono-san... his grandmother is almost a hundred."

"But I thought that it wouldn't be necessarily strange. If this area had two families called "Sono", then there wouldn't be a problem."

Chitanda nodded.

"They are related to each other, but there are two Sono families. There are quite a few families with the same sirname."

"As I thought. Therefore, I excluded Sono. Next was Nakatake, who made preparations for the sake. He arranged for the sake to arrive at one, and angered the old man with the white hair. Since the procession couldn't cross the bridge and had to take a detour, the sake arrived in time.

"However, going that far just to get the sake to arrive on time is way too foolish. Furthermore, the construction agency was called two days ago. It would be natural to simply think that the arrangements were done poorly."

"Nakatake-san... He's not a bad person."

She wasn't being very articulate here. I pressed on.

"My next suspects were the Nakagawa Construction Agency, city council member Murai, and Tanimoto, who negotiated with Murai. I was thinking that one of them was lying somewhere. Perhaps the engineering firm was trying to complete the project as soon as possible, so not wanting to lose a day, they started construction. I was also wondering if Murai told Tanimoto that it was possible to delay construction, but told the Nakagawa Construction Agency to come up with some sort of story and finish the work anyway. He might have his reasons.

"Only that the construction hadn't started at all. I was able to pass normally this morning. That means that they only just started work. They probably had extra days set aside in case of rain, so they shouldn't be in such a rush. The line of reasoning for the council member is also a little suspect."

Chitanda breathed out slightly. I was thinking that something was off, when she spoke.

"That does seems a little doubtful."

Yeah. I don't even know any of the city council members.

"When everyone was throwing out ideas that wouldn't work, there was one person who was working under the assumption that Choukyuu Bridge couldn't be crossed."

"Was that Konari-san's son?"

"I didn't know his name at that time."

Since it would be strange for us to talk while standing up like this, we sat down by the veranda. The evening sun was dazzling. It would be amazing if there was a calico or some Japanese tea here.

"That guy said that he 'purposely came back home' to see a procession that

you wouldn't get to see often. Wasn't that weird? You've been playing as a doll every year since middle school, right? That means that the festival is run every year. You certainly can't call it frequent, but it's strange to say that you don't get to see it often."

"...That does seem strange."

Chitanda nodded solemnly. Looking at it her face from the side, it looked tinged with red. It was the projection of the evening sunlight. Returning my gaze to the sky, I continued.

"But this year, a procession that you don't usually get to see happened."

"Eh?"

Chitanda stared in puzzlement.
I recalled Satoshi saying "It was miraculous."

"There was a cherry blossom blooming out of season. Also, due to the reconstruction work, Choukyuu Bridge can't be crossed. I don't know where Konari has been, but if his family is still here, he would gain this information.

"And if the procession crossing Tooji Bridge, there would be the miraculous scene of 'A doll procession passing under a cherry blossom'. That would be the procession you don't get to see often. It's a sight worth purposely coming back home for."

"Jus..."

Chitanda covered her mouth with her hand.

"Just for that!"

She exclaimed.

Ishikawa Goemon[76] danced at the back of my mind. What an amazing view! The spring view is worth a thousand gold pieces, or so they say, but 'tis too little, too little[77].

The combination of the cherry blossom, the dolls and Chitanda was able to take my breath away, even thought I was only looking at it from the back. There was definitely value in carefully looking at that scene. You could even say that it was worth the deceit.

I wouldn't say that out loud, though.

I turned the other way and asked Chitanda,

"Why do you think it was him?"

Chitanda cast her eyes down.

"Erm... I did say that I did not have any evidence from the start."
"Yeah. It's alright, I won't laugh."

Even so, Chitanda hesitated for quite a long time, then finally spoke.

"The only person I could think of who could calmly watch Murai-san lose face was Konari-san's son."

I see.

But then again, that would make Fukube Satoshi a prime suspect too.

To sum it up in a blackish, or rather, grey statement, I never intended to indict that Konari guy from the start. If I wanted to more accurately ascertain the truth of the matter, then it would be better to stay and investigate further.

But was there any meaning to this? There might have been some disturbance, after all. Then again, the festival ended without a hitch. We were happy with simply showing our palms to each other, and thankfully, Chitanda was also fine with this, and actually seemed satisfied.

As the sun became obscured, the atmosphere became even colder. But before I could say "It's cold, let's go back in.", Chitanda spoke out first.

"Oreki-san, in that room, I said that I would contact the other side's priest."

I nodded. Chitanda would contact the chief priest, while Chitanda's father would contact with the representatives. That was what I conveyed to the men, and in an instant, the chaos that came with the unavailability of Choukyuu Bridge was resolved like magic.

"This might seem boring, but please listen."

While this isn't rare for Satoshi, I've never heard Chitanda give a preface like that. With this, I was unable to complain about the cold.

Chitanda's eyes looked beyond her house and the wall surrounding the garden, concentrating on the mountain range around the village draped in evening light.

"Thanks to advancements in land improvement, it might not look like it, but in the past, this wetland was divided into two sectors. The area around Choukyuu Bridge used to be a marshland, and north of that was our village, and to the south was another village. But now, they have combined, and the entire area is known as Jinde in Kamiyama City."

Not saying a word or even swallowing, I simply listened.

"Our village had Minazushi Shrine, while the southern village had Sakou Shrine. Disputes over land and water do not occur now, but entering the other side for religious matters is like intruding into others' territory, and would cause both sides to be uncomfortable.

"There were special circumstances this time, so I think the parishioners at Sakou Shrine would understand. Hanai-san and the men know this, but even so, entering without prior warning could cause conflict between both sides. They wanted to inform the people at Sakou Shrine, but there was no one who could act as a channel for that.

"I said that the problem was not that severe, right? After I said that I would contact the priest of Sakou Shrine, everyone relaxed because they knew that we would probably be able to cross over to the southern side."

"... I see."

I was honestly quite interested.

"Satoshi calls it the prestigious clans."

But Chitanda slightly raised her voice.

"Is that so?"

" ....."
"Isn't this a small world? All I did was resolve an issue between two villages in the northern region of Kamiyama City, or to use its colloquial name, Jinde. Oreki-san, I do not think that it is an insignificant act, but I cannot think of it as something major."

The sun had reached the tip of the mountain, and the surrounding areas bathed in evening sun started turning dark.

"Konari-san's son hopes to become a photographer. He's attending a technical school in Osaka just for that. That's why I can agree to your theory about him really wanting to see a rare scene. If so, he didn't just watch, but probably took some photographs too. That matter aside, I think that I will go to university after graduating from high school.

"...While Konari-san's son might be different, I will return here. No matter which route I take, my final destination will always be here. In this place."

And then Chitanda put on a smile.

"Oreki-san. What did you do about the humanity-science selection?"

Being suddenly asked about a "humanity-science selection", I couldn't understand what it was for a while. I realized that it was the choice between the humanities and the sciences for first year students moving up to the second year, and I finally answered.

"Ah, I went with the humanities."

"Why?"

"Out of the four science subjects, my favorite is chemistry, and out of the four humanities subjects, my favorite is Japanese history. I prefer Japanese history to chemistry, so I went with humanities."

With a hand covering her mouth, Chitanda laughed.

"Very logical."

"What about you?"

"... I chose the sciences."

Chitanda's grades were in the top five in our year. She didn't say so herself, and the rankings weren't publicly released, so that's just an estimation on my part. Anyway, someone like her would have a wide range of career choices.

But Chitanda wasn't thinking about that.

"I'm not reluctant or sad to return here. I would like to fulfill my role as daughter of the Chitanda family, which is in a position of leadership in the northern area of Jinde. I have thought about how to do that in high school.

"The first method would be to find ways to produce crops with greater value, so everyone would have plenty to eat.

"Another way would be to use economic strategies to increase the efficiency of production, so everyone can avoid falling in the red.

"In the end, I have decided to pursue the former. That was why I chose the sciences."

While I was staying silent, Chitanda asked me another question.

"Do you know the biggest reason that made me decide on that?"

"Not really..."

I said, when I thought of something.

"Just that the latter doesn't really seem to suit you."

Chitanda nodded slightly.

"That's right... To put it directly, it was that problem at the Cultural Festival when we were trying to sell our anthologies. I understood that I caused a lot of trouble for Oreki-san. That made me realize that I'm probably not cut out for managing a company."

Yeah, that's what I think too.

While we were sitting on the veranda, Chitanda extended her hands to the heavens. The sky was almost dark already, and I could see a few stars.

"Please take a look, Oreki-san. This is my place. All that's here is water and soil. The people are growing old and tired. The mountains are regularly afforested, but what do you think of its value? I do not think that this place is the most beautiful. Nor is it full of potential. But then..."

She put down her arms and looked down.

"I wanted you to see it, Oreki-san."

At that time, I gained an answer to a doubt I had been holding.

I wanted to say this: "By the way, about the business strategy that you gave up on, how about I take care of that for you?"

But what did I do? I thought that I should say it, but in fact, I didn't feel like I could say it at all.

This was the first time I felt like this. This first experience became an important key to a question I couldn't solve before.

Now I knew.

Why Fukube Satoshi broke Ibara's chocolate.

This had to be the reason.

It was probably the same reason why I did not say what I wanted to, and

said a different line instead, right here at the Chitanda family residence, right now as dusk approached.

With feigned nonchalance, I spoke.
"It's getting pretty cold."

Chitanda's eyes widened a little in surprise. Then she gave a gentle smile and slowly shook her head.

"No, it's spring!"

Afterword

Greetings, this is Yonezawa Honobu.

I present to you volume four of the series. This time, it's a collection of short stories.

Looking back on my school days, I always had the principled belief that just as tomorrow came after today, there would always be the boundless loop where the first trimester would follow the third trimester. I still don't think that student life was good, but being afraid of the impression of a time limit, I may have always looked away while just drifting around. That's basically my intolerance to time.

As for stories, I'm also bad with shifting the once fixed time and changing already constructed relationships. I'd always wanted Tripitaka to be continually assaulted by demons in his Journey to the West, and Yajikita[78] to continue their fun and foolish adventures. I never hoped for them to traverse Tenjiku[79] or Ise[80].

But the protagonist of this book is fixed in time. Setting aside the awkward period when the characters met each other for the first time, the stories are divided into First Trimester, Summer Break, Second Trimester, Winter Break, Third Trimester and Spring Break. If I write a detailed explanation on why the characters' thoughts and feelings change, then this wouldn't be an afterword, and more of a commentary of my own work. To put it straightforwardly, I would say that the reasons are time and compromise. After spending one whole year together, the distance between the characters wouldn't stay the same. That change is what I was trying to portray here.

But the change in distance between these characters would be gentle and slow, rather than a sudden upheaval. That is why this book is titled "The Doll That Took a Detour".

Also, since this is a collection of short stories, I was able to make use of various situations. As a result, I was able to test out different mystery plots. If you know a lot about this series as well as the mystery genre, you would

have probably noticed that "The Case of the Hand-made Chocolate" can be considered a reverse mystery.

If this book has caused you to be more interested in broadening your mystery reading, then I would be honored if "Those Who Know Something" serves as a gateway to Harry Kemelman's "The Nine Mile Walk", and "Sappy New Year" to Jacques Futrelle's "The Problem of Cell 13".

June 2010

Yonezawa Honobu

Translator's Afterword

Whew! After a year or so of translating, I'm finally done with translating Volume 4 of Hyouka! First off, I would like to apologize to the readers for taking such a long time to complete this translation. You could say that I have the worst qualities of Oreki Houtarou and am guilty of committing the same deadly sin. I also hope that I've translated this book as faithfully as possible to the intentions of the author, Yonezawa Honobu.

Now that I'm done with this, I plan to get a copy of Volume 6 and attempt to translate it. Anyway, I hope that you've enjoyed these stories as much as I have (I found "The Doll That Took a Detour" especially beautiful), and I also hope that you will introduce this amazing series to others. Thank you for your support!

-Ex.wife

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Houtarou actually asked how to write 鑽in 研鑽を積む which means to devote oneself to one's studies.
2. ↑ This is a play on 草木を眠る三つ時 which means the dead of night.
3. ↑ If you, like Satoshi, are interested, go to http://www.jp-life.japanpost.jp/en/index.html for more information.
4. ↑ I believe this refers to a club where members play Uta-garuta, a Japanese card game based on poems - [1]
5. ↑ Horizontal alliances refers to states allying with each other to repel the Qin state, while vertical alliances refers to states allying with Qin to participate in its ascendancy.
6. ↑ I didn't forget to include punctuation for a bunch of sentences, it was just Ibara.
7. ↑ In traditional Buddhist thought, people are said to have 108 afflictions or kleshas. There are six senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and consciousness) multiplied by three reactions (positive, negative, or indifference) making 18 "feelings." Each of these feelings can be either "attached to pleasure or detached from pleasure" making 36 "passions", each of which may be manifested in the past, present, or future, making 108 klesha.
8. ↑ The original phrase is 蛇のいる藪をつついた which means to disturb the brush where the snake is residing.
9. ↑ An ancient Chinese divination text, also known as I Ching.
10. ↑ Combination of Nessie and Hamana
11. ↑ A kind of saltwater fish.
12. ↑ This refers to Japan's Warring States period, when many different warlords fought each other for territory and power
13. ↑ Nobunaga was a powerful warlord who started the unification of Japan during the Warring States period in the 16th century
14. ↑ Refers to Azai Nagamasa, a diamyo who was married to Nobunaga's sister, Oichi
15. ↑ A Japanese drum
16. ↑ Refer to Story 1: If I Have to Do It, Make It Quick
17. ↑ Obi is a sash tied at the back of a kimono.
18. ↑ 両手に花 means to be flanked by two beautiful women, but I decided to be literal here because Oreki mentions flowers in his next

sentence. You can probably deduce that Satoshi meant there were three pretty girls with him.

19. ↑ Plaster and ointment have the same pronunciation in Japanese.
20. ↑ If you're interested, the name of the Buddhist equipment shop is written as 広聞堂 and the name of the bookstore is written as 光文堂.
21. ↑ The phrase "smells fishy" in Japanese is きな臭い. きな means quina and 臭い means smelly. Chitanda's mistake was that she split the phrase into the two parts.
22. ↑ 10,000 yen is roughly worth 80 USD
23. ↑ Japanese idiom meaning to reach a wild conclusion.
24. ↑ Shinto purification ritual
25. ↑ As opposed to a double door
26. ↑ Refers to the best fortune one can draw at Shinto shrines for a few yen
27. ↑ Refers to Sugiwara no Michizane, a scholar, poet and politician who is revered as the God of Learning
28. ↑ A 1.8-liter bottle usually containing sake
29. ↑ A sash for traditional Japanese clothing
30. ↑ A low table covered by a heavy blanket, with a heat source underneath
31. ↑ Note that this story is set in 2001, so mobile phones aren't so ubiquitous.
32. ↑ Inari is the god of harvests, wealth and fertility
33. ↑ Refers to the highest rank given to a shrine
34. ↑ A daruma is a round doll that will always return to upright position when tilted. A daruma stove is a stove that looks like a daruma
35. ↑ Silk, wool, or synthetic fiber with a distinctive crisp, crimped appearance
36. ↑ Mito Koumon is an old Japanese drama. The main character, Tokugawa Mitsukuni, proclaimed himself as "a crêpe merchant from Etsugo"
37. ↑ A type of traditional Japanese clothing, tied at the waist and falling to the ankles, worn on top of a kimono
38. ↑ Shrine maiden
39. ↑ Japanese sock with a separation between the big toe and other toes
40. ↑ A future blessing indicates that you will have good luck in the future, with the implication that your luck right now won't be very good
41. ↑ A philosophical argument that goes like this:

1) If A, then B.
2) A
3)Therefore, B

42. ↑ A sacred Shinto tree
43. ↑ The actual phrase is: Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth
44. ↑ Satoshi probably found it amusing because Yoshimoto's men were said to have fled upon seeing the Oda army marching on them in the rain, so the mountains of corpses and rivers of blood were extremely inaccurate
45. ↑ Refers to spring
46. ↑ Ideal Japanese woman
47. ↑ To hold a meeting is 催す, which is the first kanji of 催淫**薬**, which means aphrodisiac
48. ↑ An idea during World War 2 which states that battleships should have cannons as large as possible for a more advantageous position
49. ↑ I believe the game described here is Virtual On
50. ↑ Satoshi's screams of disbelief, I presume
51. ↑ Limit hands in Japanese mahjong, giving 48000 points to the dealer or 32000 points to the other players
52. ↑ All tiles with the same shape
53. ↑ This is some wordplay, I believe. Pity sounds like love in Japanese (both of them are pronounced "Ai").
54. ↑ 188mm x 130mm
55. ↑ Oreki corrected himself here because the Japanese word for craftsman can be taken to mean spy
56. ↑ Japanese soup stock made from fish and kelp
57. ↑ After a few hours of research, I still can't find a table role playing game of that name which fits the few lines of description here. Those who know something, please don't hesitate to drop me an email!
58. ↑ Refer to Story 1: If I Have to Do It, Make It Quick
59. ↑ The bodhisattva who looks over children, travelers and the underworld
60. ↑ An architectural detail found above doors
61. ↑ A place in the southern region of Honshu
62. ↑ Houtarou compares Chitanda to a lotus flower in The Ghost, When Examined
63. ↑ Chou(長) means long and (久) means old

64. ↑ Loose informal Japanese coats usually worn during festivals
65. ↑ Flat, thonged Japanese sandals
66. ↑ Socks with a separation between the big toe and other toes
67. ↑ Both knees on the ground, with one's legs underneath the thighs and buttocks resting on the heels. The Seiza is considered the polite way to sit in Japan.
68. ↑ Believe it or not, that's an actual Japanese proverb. A similar idiom would be "Roast geese don't come flying into your mouth", meaning that things don't work so well in the real world
69. ↑ Houtarou is wondering about how to write Shige in Kanji. For those interested, Shige is written as 茂 and 重 respectively
70. ↑ Usually translated as "Storm and stress", refers to a period of agitation in this context
71. ↑ Japanese formal coat
72. ↑ Loose trousers with pleats at the front
73. ↑ A similar idiom would be "Apparal makes the man"
74. ↑ Translated literally, it would be called a Crow-hat. It's a black-lacquered hat that used to be worn by court nobles
75. ↑ A kind of lace with a square mesh
76. ↑ A Japanese Robin Hood who tried and failed to assassinate Totoyomi Hideyoshi
77. ↑ An quote from Kinmon Gosan no Kiri, a play about Ishikawa Goemon
78. ↑ Refers to Yajirobe and Kitahachi in a comic picaresque novel called Toukaidouchuu Hizakurige
79. ↑ The historical East Asian name of India
80. ↑ A city home to the most sacred Shinto shrine in Japan